POETIC ACTS: PERFORMANCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY, 1840-1880

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date Defended: April 9, 2014

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Date approved: April 9, 2014

ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores representations of performance (theatrical, oratorical, domestic, and social) in works by canonical poets Emily Dickinson and Sarah Piatt, popular performers Fanny Kemble and Adah Menken, and Spiritualist trance lecturer Achsa Sprague. I consider the work of women poets within the context of a highly performative mid-nineteenth-century American culture – one rich not only in traditional forms such as drama, oratory, sermons and musical performances, but also emerging and developing forms like the revival, public lecture, literary and dramatic recitations, breeches performances, and spiritualist demonstrations. Along with new forms came new media, technologies, and venues for public performance, as well as novel opportunities for women to participate. The prevalence of performance, and the power of its rhetorical techniques and strategies to both inspire and influence audiences, had a profound effect on female writers and their own creative acts. My approach applies current work in several disciplines – cultural studies, theater history, performance theory, feminist theory, American oratory, and literary studies – to a genre and period combination largely ignored by scholars. Focusing on the period 1840 to 1880, I develop careful analyses of many poems while situating them within developments in mid-century performance culture, from changes in the gender and class standing of audiences, ideas about performance's intended purpose (didactic instruction, sympathetic connection, cathartic entertainment, or impassioned social action), and new technologies and media for its expression, advertising, and distribution. I argue that reading for performance, as subject matter and setting, encourages us to engage more directly with performative aspects of the work itself, particularly as they help to expose tensions within contemporary discourses. A performance reading allows us to historicize and theorize at once,

with implications not only for studies of mid-century women's poetry, but also the poetic form and related considerations of lyric subjectivity and sociality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the University of Kansas English Department, KU Graduate Studies, and the staff of KU's Watson Library for their efficiency and professionalism. The daily efforts of Lydia Ash, Lori Whitten, and Robin Holliday in KU English are particularly appreciated. I am indebted to my dissertation committee for their personal attention to my project and their own examples of first-rate scholarship. I thank my director, Laura Mielke, for her patience, humanity, incisive reading and suggestions, and guidance with and beyond this dissertation. I am grateful to Susan Harris for pushing me to consider the cultural contexts that turn close readings into a cohesive argument; to Iris Fischer for passionate support and encouragement throughout the project; to Ken Irby for loving poetry and finding it everywhere; and to Sherrie Tucker, from American Studies and Theater, for her enthusiasm and genuine interest in my defense. As an undergraduate, I was encouraged by wonderful teachers at both Colorado College (Marcia Dobson, John Riker, Joseph Pickle) and Park College (Dennis Okerstrom, Stephen Atkinson, Ronald Miriani). The love and support of family makes every endeavor both bearable and worthwhile. My parents, Randy and Peggy Jessee, first provided a home full of books and a respect for knowledge. My siblings – Hans, Chris, and Jenny – and their spouses/partners supplied much-needed laughter and camaraderie. I am fortunate to have a sister who is also a best friend. My dear nephews, Ian and Taylor, and niece, Elise, inspired me with their own dreams and doings. I thank my in-laws, Chris and Dale Glenn and Jack and Karen Keim, who learned not to ask "how is the writing going?" but supported it nonetheless. Cats Mulligan and Abby were my constant companions during the writing of this dissertation. Most vitally, I thank my husband, Marc Keim, whose unwavering love made every word possible.

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INTRODUCTION

In addition to many theatrical photographs, taken in character or costume, actress Adah Isaacs Menken also sat for a photo of herself as poet. Taken by Napoleon Sarony in 1866, the photo shows Menken sitting at a desk, seemingly captured in a moment of determined effort in her writing. Various elements – the disarray of items on the desk, a small vase of flowers, a cup of tea – help to convey the illusion of domestic privacy, suggesting the viewer is in a privileged position of intimacy.

(Harvard Theatre Collection)

Given her immense popularity as a breeches performer, the fact that she is wearing an open men's shirt and military jacket (similar to one worn by her in *The French Spy*) with a woman's full skirt further suggests Menken "herself" has just come from the stage.

Considered in the context of Menken's poems on performance, the scene takes on added significance. The figure is instantly recognizable as Menken the actress, who was by that time the most photographed woman in the world (Dudden 161), but also something more (or less) than contemporary theatrical fans expected. Assuming the pose of poetess in a staged display of interiority, Menken illustrates the "playful illusiveness and provocation" of performance, both embodied and written (Slinn, *Victorian* 70). Whether we read the figure as half-dressed or half-dressed depends on which of the two roles – actress or poet – we privilege as the more "genuine" Menken. While explicitly presenting a contrast between acting and writing, the scene implicitly engages related binaries – fiction/reality, public/domestic, female/male, appearance/interiority – complicating rather than clarifying the relations between and among them.[1] In the photo, as in much of Menken's poetry, performance is both subject matter and rhetorical mode.

The highly public terms of gendered subjectivity in the period required all women to perform – both in the home and beyond – from conventional scripts provided by sentimental ideology, Christianity, and patriarchal domesticity.[2] Within mid-nineteenth-century American culture, Alan Ackerman argues, "theater was understood less as a particular space than as a set of conditions"; any site – domestic, theatrical, social, textual – might function as "a kind of theater" for performing and witnessing subjectivity (xiv). Poetry provided a stage for women's critical engagement with (and potential revision of) contemporary culture's scripts, particularly its constructions of gender, public space, and social power. Through the writing of poetry, particularly poems representing performance, women confronted the embeddedness of cultural and social contexts within language, and its implications for their own creative acts. Thinking about the poem itself as a verbal act, rather than object, we can better understand the linguistic processes through which it produces meaning(s) and affect(s). As a verbal act taking

performance as its subject, women's poetry exposes the problems and possibilities of public discourse, making explicit the mutually constitutive relations of ideologies and practices within mid-century culture.

"Poetic Acts" considers the poetry of five women – canonical poets Emily Dickinson and Sarah Piatt, popular performers Fanny Kemble and Adah Menken, and Spiritualist trance lecturer Achsa Sprague – within the context of a highly performative mid-century American culture. From diverse backgrounds and widely varied experiences with public culture, each repeatedly turned to performance as subject matter and setting for poetry. Performance provided both a cultural object or event of common interest and a mode of engagement with and representation of related (but less easily communicable) ideas about subjectivity, gender, social power, and public space. Focusing on the period 1840-1880, I read representations of performance in women's poetry through the critical frames of performance theory, cultural and literary studies, and feminist theory, as well as histories of American theater, oratory, and religious practice. Rosemarie Bank writes, "Viewed as theater, as a performance at once earnest and assumed, true and false, accepting and contesting, liberating and oppressing, nineteenth-century culture becomes . . . much richer than it can be when viewed as a confining structure" (190). Applying this formulation to the study of American women's poetry, I argue that cultural engagement and critique are achieved not only (or even primarily) through poetry's material circulation, but also its production of meaning at sites of reading and writing. A performance reading considers the contemporary cultural environment, generic conventions for women's poetry, and expectations for women's public engagement as essential elements in the verbal act of the poem. Performance was not only a shared fact of cultural life for mid-century women, but a frame for thinking about and experimenting with sociality and subjectivity in their writing.

Current scholarship in nineteenth-century American women's writing continues to privilege prose as more directly indicative of cultural engagement – and productive of cultural criticism – than poetry. Recent period histories addressing prose but not poetry include Anne Boyd's *Writing for Immortality* (2004), Naomi Sofer's *Making the 'America of Art'* (2005), and Laura Laffrado's *Uncommon Women* (2009). Only one of fourteen chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (2001), edited by Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould, is devoted to poetry. Works treating topics not associated with women's traditional roles, such as genius, artistic ambition, aesthetics, and cultural nationalism, are markedly limited to studies of the novel. The marginalization of poetry suggests continued overcorrection for New Critical formalism, ongoing attempts to "recover" sentimentality (primarily through the novel) as a politically-engaged mode, and lingering assumptions of Romantic isolation as the dominant paradigm for poetic subjectivity. The innovative, interdisciplinary approach offered by a performance focus may invite new scholars and readers to the field of nineteenth-century American women's poetry, as well as provide opportunities for shared research across generic boundaries.

Although women's poetry was the subject of recovery efforts in the 1980's and 1990's, subsequent critical studies have emphasized poet biography and publishing histories almost to the exclusion of close readings.[3] Works including Janet Gray's *She Wields a Pen* (1997), Paula Bernat Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), and Eliza Richards's *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (2004) detail the involvement of women's poetry in contemporary cultural debates, and trace its creation within and circulation through social circles, periodical culture, and popular reform movements. Gray emphasizes women's creation of "an alternative, female public sphere" through print culture: "Women wrote in the context of their participation

in groups and movements whose purposes extended beyond literary production" (xxxii, xxx). Bennett also focuses on women's newspaper and periodical poetry, treating it "as an instance of speech whose expressive and mimetic power is organized explicitly or implicitly for argumentative ends – in order to achieve a practical discursive goal: persuasion" (5). Richards more usefully locates the literary salon as a site "for the performance and dissemination of intimate models of lyric transaction" shared by men and women, and informed by contemporary debates over gender, space, and aesthetics (7). Because "the mid-century was the great era of poetry," Richards argues, the form served as a "prime vehicle for the convergence of privacy and publicity" (11). Arguing that poetry was produced not in Romantic isolation but in a decidedly social setting and spirit, these studies have been invaluable for uncovering women's activism and resistance, and recovering forgotten works and writers, but they privilege the politics of social discourse over considerations of poetic language and form.

The "cultural work" that mid-century women's poetry performs is not limited to direct engagement in social movements; rather, it also includes challenging the very terms of engagement for women as public speakers and poets in the period. Women wrote through the language and ideological structures of conventional discourses, even when they produced a voice that reached beyond them. Shira Wolosky argues that "poetry gains both historical grounding and aesthetic coherence and force through the investigation of its transformative relationship to the rhetorics that surround it" (*Poetry* x). More pointedly, E. Warwick Slinn asks, "If we purport to be studying the most sophisticated and highly organized language use in our culture, why is language itself not always the underlying question?" ("Poetic" 61-2). Joseph Harrington's words of caution to Americanists in 1996 are perhaps still relevant: "Neither a definition of poetry as divorced from the public nor one that has determinate and identifiable effects or uses will do"

(511). The poem or poet's overt social engagement is one aspect of literary studies, but so too is the linguistic object, the poem's existence as "semiotic phenomenon – a bearer of meanings" (Slinn *Victorian* 188). A performance reading of poetry, while addressing avenues for women's literal engagement in contemporary culture, pays equal attention to their creative use of period rhetoric, vocabulary, and verbal forms. This dual focus on culture and language, and their explicit intersection in performance events, is the approach offered in "Poetic Acts."

What is it about women's relation to language and embodied display that makes the privatization of performance through poetic form both interesting and productive? Written representations of heightened publicity – both personal display and spectatorship – complicated contemporary expectations of women's semiotic (both as bodies and language users) transparency. As Richards argues, because "lyric was associated with the capacity for unmediated personal expression" in the mid-nineteenth-century, it played a crucial role in "engendering personality and sociability in the period" (*Gender* 6). She notes that the relation between gender and genre in the period "was so intimate that it was common to compliment a middle-class American antebellum woman by calling her a poem" (*Gender* 16). Woman was herself a poem, but never precisely a poet, at least in the terms established by Romanticism. Margaret Homans also discusses the implications of women's unique relation to language, literary history, and the "word-centered activities" central to the Romantic narrative of lyric subjectivity in the period (*Women* 33). Performance offered poets a way of thinking and talking about, understanding, and engaging with public life and culture, even if they were unwilling or unable to enter it directly (Sprague, Dickinson) and perhaps especially when they could not be imagined outside of it (Menken, Kemble). Performance was not merely shared subject matter for the poets, but more essentially a fact of mid-century American life that brought issues of public

and private, artifice and expression, body and mind, into greater focus. Women's cultural experiences as objects (of view and discourse) helped shape their vision of possibilities as subjects, both spectators and speakers.

At this point, it will be helpful to define several terms and concepts related to performance, which will be addressed in greater detail in individual chapters. I am concerned with *performance* as event, the *performative* as statement, and *performativity* as critical lens. Widely conceived, performance includes staged drama, child's play, housekeeping rituals, political speeches, and local customs. Richard Schechner defines performance as "performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse," whether through repetitive social conventions or theatrical training (22). Performances are made up of "twice-behaved behaviors" or "restored behavior," physical or verbal actions that are not-for-the-first time. While individual elements are "restored," new combinations and contexts make each performance – constituted by interactions and relations between elements – unique. Although the goals of theatrical and social performance may vary – with theater aiming to entertain audiences and ritualized conventions intending "real" results – the quality of "restored behavior" is common to both. Schechner explains that entertainment and efficacy are not binary opposites, but poles of a continuum in performance; no one event is purely one or the other, as performance itself "originates in the creative tension of the binary" (71). From an anthropological or cultural studies perspective, performance can also be defined as embodied action through which knowledge is learned or transmitted (Taylor xvi). In all of these cases, a repetitive action is initiated in order to bring about a result or response; although its specific form and purpose may vary, performance is constituted by the "doing" of it.

Given performance's emphasis on exchange, described above, as well as its origin in established codes or patterns, we can see that language itself performs an action. John L. Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), defines the *performative* as a statement that accomplishes an action and generates effects ("I do" in a marriage ceremony, for example) rather than merely describing a state of affairs, which he designates a *constative*. Austin acknowledges that it is not the speaker's power that authorizes the act's effect, but that of a larger institution (church or state) having the power to make its statement binding. Each utterance is just one part of a larger "speech act," defined as the totality of the verbal event – "the total situation in which the utterance is issued" – rather than the initial statement or intent of the speaker (52). The speech act takes into account the receiver of the message, the context in which it is performed, and the conventions utilized (any of which may complicate or nullify the speaker's original intention). Further, there is an excess of effect beyond the linguistic meaning, or *illocutionary force*, of the act (apology, confession, dare), which cannot always be calculated or controlled, and this he terms its *perlocutionary effect* (irritation, outrage, sympathy) (109). John Searle's *Speech Acts* (1969) extends Austin's argument beyond individual statement categories, focusing more broadly on the rule-governed nature of language and language acts.[4] The concept of the performative allows us to see verbal communication as a performance that brings about a new state of being, whether through conventional action (a married couple, through the marriage rite) or creative (an art object, through poetry or drama).

Performativity expands the notion of performative production beyond language into other aspects of social reality. As Diana Taylor describes it, in this formulation performative is less an adjective (describing how language performs) than an inherent feature or function of discourse itself (6). Performativity is a concept utilized by a variety of disciplines and methodologies,

including theater studies, gender studies, postmodernism, and deconstruction, each with a unique understanding and application. Schechner defines performativity as "realities that take on the qualities of performance" (110). Although Austin initially separated performatives and constatives, and excluded the words of theater and poetry from ordinary speech act performances, Jacques Derrida explains that all statements are structured by a "generalized iterability" (the fact of citation being the basis for Austin's "conventional" uses and Searle's rules) and, in that way, equally productive of effects. Generalized iterability accounts for "a pervasive theatricality common to stage and world alike" (Parker and Sedgwick 4). To this, Judith Butler adds the notion of gender identity as not a quality prior to or resulting from performance but a reality that is itself performative, meaning that a social construction like gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed" (*Gender* 185). In this sense, performativity is understood as "the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes" (Parker and Sedgwick 2). The performative's "accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force," in Butler's words ("Burning" 205), means that intelligibility and authority are both bound and buried. As a model for the poetry-culture relationship, Slinn argues, performativity "accounts for both mimetic function (external reference: the ability to replicate cultural dynamics) and constitutive function (self-reference: an utterance that produces its own event, the event of which it speaks, which is also the event that is its speaking)" ("Poetic" 68). Awareness that social power and cultural authority operate through speech acts – naming, promising, storytelling – exposes the workings of discourse, revealing its constructedness and potentially disrupting conventional processes and relations.

Performativity is a fact of language, and a particularly interesting one in poetry, a form that foregrounds language's figural aspects and heightens awareness of its citationality. Again,

each word as a sign is repeated – and gains its possible meaning(s) through that history of signification – but its enactment in each new context, informed equally by intentions and accidents of production and reception, is essentially a unique performance. Although they lacked the theoretical vocabulary or framework to develop focused analyses, the women poets discussed in "Poetic Acts" understood, to varying degrees, the implications of language and discourse for subjectivity. Writing about performance as an event, while conceiving it as an epistemology, they could explore and expose ruptures between social practice and ideology that they might not address directly. As Barbara Johnson remarks, fictive speech acts and real cultural practices are coextensive: "If people are put to death by a verdict and not by a poem, it is not because the law is not a fiction" (60). Repeatedly, in the poems discussed in this dissertation, critique operates through the speaker's or poet's "etiolation" (to use Austin's term) of conventional meanings and uses – through parody, irony, or ambiguity – making explicit the mutually constitutive relations of conventions, ideologies, and subjectivities within and beyond linguistic processes. Capitalizing on the creative potential of language as an inexact medium, poets offer verbal acts that exceed and confound the expectations set by readers. The poems on performance discussed in this dissertation anticipate later insights and fundamental concepts in feminist theory, cultural studies, and the philosophy of language, namely the gaze, embodiment, and even performativity itself. The authors' identity as women, as poets, and as the particularly challenging "woman poet," had to be enacted within and through a language not wholly accepting of them as either subjects or speakers.

A number of studies of the nineteenth-century American novel, particularly from the 1990s, examine performance and/or performativity as a shared concern among novels and theater culture. Ackerman's *The Portable Theater* (1999) and Randall Knoper's *Acting Naturally* (1995)

discuss the frequency of performance as subject matter in popular novels throughout the century, including Sarah Josepha Hale's *The Lecturess, or Woman's Sphere* (1839), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), and Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886). Nineteenth-century theater and novels, Knoper argues, were "imbued with each other, novelists in particular writing for an audience in tune with stage conventions, echoing theatrical values of melodrama, burlesque, variety, spectacle, 'situation,' and 'effect,' and rehearsing a preoccupation with performance and role-playing" (9). Ackerman, too, notes "the self-conscious use of dramaturgical idioms and strategies in the project of literature" (xvi). (Though he implies a broader frame, Ackerman's discussion of poetry is limited to Whitman.) Writing on the period's performative reading practices, Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters* (1993) and Glenn Hendler's *Public Sentiments* (2001) address sentimentality's acculturating force in training novel readers to perform "appropriately" as social actors. While assumptions of generic resonances between the novel and drama indicate the continued privileging of prose over poetry as a culturally-engaged form, these studies draw attention to the influence of theater on nineteenth-century American literature and can usefully be extended to poetry.

When performance is addressed in relation to poetry, scholarship focuses most often on how poems were utilized in cultural performance or the poet's rhetorical engagement with readers. Recent books on the social practice of performed poetry in nineteenth-century America, including Joan Shelley Rubin's *Songs of Ourselves* (2007) and Angela Sorby's *Schoolroom Poets* (2005), underscore poetry as a truly popular form, widely used in schools and public ceremonies.[5] Recitation by memory and reading aloud were considered important skills, indicative of the nation's highest values; as Rubin writes, "teachers associated vocal training

with producing an eloquent citizenry possessed of high principle and judgment. Social success was a not unwelcome by-product of that process" (115). A number of scholars treat individual poets as performers who utilize rhetorical techniques to engage more productively with a distinct readership, whether private correspondents (Dickinson) or periodical and anthology cultures (Piatt). What remains to be done, and my project aims to initiate, is to expand the notion of performativity beyond the practical issue of poetry's circulation and reception in the nineteenth century to its very form and function *as* poetry.[6]

Considered together, three very different recent works provide something of a composite model for the approach to women's poetry that I forward in this dissertation: Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery* (2005), Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence* (2011), and E. Warwick Slinn's *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* (2003). Jackson argues that lyric theory has occluded both how we read poems and how we imagine them in (or outside of) the historical and personal networks that helped to shape them. Following Susan Stewart, Jackson argues that poetry, as a way of dealing with the world through its language – as "the problem of what form expression should take" – has implications for writing individual subjectivity, as well as the performative character of reading (82). She urges us to pay attention to Dickinson's figure of address – her "you" instead of her "I" – in order to appreciate how she self-consciously engages with the levels of mediation between herself as writer and her (historically specific) reader (134). The material fact of the written page that "stands in" between the writer-who-would-be-speaker and the reader-as-surrogate-listener allows a kind of presence, but it is not the literal presence the writer desires, so she enacts the page as stage only to reveal its inadequacy. While in many ways Jackson offers a study of poetry reading, her attention to shared issues between writers and

readers (assumed, actual, and scholarly) helps to expose poetry's embededdness in cultural practices.

Where Jackson addresses the material and social conditions of writing for mid-nineteenth-century women poets, Bernstein in *Racial Innocence* focuses on how cultural performance may be productive of realities, rather than merely mimetic. Bernstein proposes a reading of "scriptive things," material objects such as dolls, novels, and product packaging that script their broader cultural use and meaning (8). While the scriptive thing itself is "a material item that invited historically located behaviors," it functions not as "a rigid dictation of performed action but rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation" (9, 12). In particular, she argues that the concept of "childhood innocence" that was central to racial formation in mid-century culture, performed through various objects and practices, produced an increasingly divided view of "good" white and "bad" black children. While Bernstein does not treat poetry in her study, poems may be fruitfully approached as scriptive things – not only as texts, but as cultural phenomena, a set of practices surrounding an object that prove particularly powerful at mystifying ideology "by hiding it in plain sight" (18). Women's poetry as a generic category scripted assumptions that shaped readers' interpretations and uses of it – assumptions poets could play with and against in order to produce disruptive subtexts.

Moving from cultural product to its workings as process, Slinn in *Victorian Poetry* persuasively argues that performativity as a model for the relationship between poetry and culture is a way of "showing how doing things with words locates poems within a matrix of social relations" (7). Slinn points out that poetry and performatives emerge from the same linguistic traditions, the language of rhetoric and partiality as opposed to the language of

transparency and correspondence: "Poetry, consequently, is homologous with perfomatives insofar as generically it privileges self-referentiality, flaunts illocutionary effects, reiterates conventions and formulae, creates its own meaning, and above all, does something with words" (25). Through close readings of works by Robert Browning, D.G. Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and others, he argues that poetry reconstitutes or reshapes cultural reality "in the very act of reiterating its norms" (23). Slinn's attention to form also recovers the notion of "voice" for poetry studies, drawing attention to "the reciprocal and discursive means by which normative structures and personal subjectivities are shown to invade and constitute each other through acts of speaking" (28). Voice is conceived not as evidence of the author's presence, but as trope or persona, as fiction and effect rather than "truth" or origin. Although Slinn addresses Victorian British poetry exclusively, and poetic representations of speech, his insights are applicable to representations of performance in American poetry, as well.

Where Jackson provides a view of the material conditions of poetry production, and Bernstein addresses the text as cultural object and conventional practice, Slinn provides a model of close reading that attends to poetry's "self-conscious formalism" (*Victorian* 1). Taken together, all three approach intersections of literature and performance in nineteenth-century culture in innovative and inclusive ways. Building on their examples, my chapters in "Poetic Acts" address cultural issues as diverse as conflict over embodiment and representation in antitheatrical sentiment, the fantasy of a causal relation between expression and reception in speech acts, ideological foundations for literal versus figurative uses of language, and assumed connections between gender and genre. I go beyond them by focusing on performance as uniquely relevant to studies of women's poetry and language use.

A brief overview of mid-century women's engagement in the public practices of theater, oratory, religion, and publishing will help to contextualize the performance poems addressed in individual chapters.[7] While period developments in each provided new opportunities for women's involvement, as Nan Johnson observes, "any cautious celebration of women's widening role in public life is typically accompanied by an explicit warning that the public woman should not neglect her true calling" (*Gender* 60). Women – as audience members, consumers, writers, and performers – were more visible in American mid-century public life than ever before but still limited, even there, by the strictures of domestic ideology.

One example of the pervasive influence of performance on mid-century women is provided by Achsa Sprague. Although her cultural access was limited by finances and location (she grew up in rural Vermont), her experiences with live and recorded performance were impactful and enduring. In poems, she refers to Edwin Booth's performance in *Richard III*, Swedish singer Jenny Lind, the Beecher and Chapin preaching families, popular operas *Don Giovanni* and *Norma*, political orator Wendell Phillips, Abraham Lincoln's address to the 37th Congress on 4 July 1861, and the "Liberty or Death" speech of Patrick Henry; imagines a revolutionary speech from 1848 France; and offers a response to King Henry IV of France's address to his Army as given in John Henry Mancur's 1834 book, *Henri Quatre*. In her journal, Sprague writes of hearing Theodore Parker speak, touring Barnum's Museum and the Crystal Palace in New York City, and seeing Edwin Forrest in *The Gladiator* in Providence. While Sprague herself employed the public stage as a trance medium lecturer, she shared her cotemporaries' anxieties about popular theater. Sprague's journal of 30 May 1856 records a failed plan to see a play while in Philadelphia: "Was intending to go to the Theater in the evening with some friends, but the Spirits through B.L. Harris wished to speak to me, & this hindered my

going. I have a strong suspicion that it was a polite hint from my Guardians that they did not wish me to go. I never go often" (175). Sprague's defensiveness helps to illustrate the deep-seated (though paradoxical) antitheatrical sentiment operating in the highly performative American mid-century.

A model for the socially respectable, artistically legitimate, and popular female performer in the mid-century was provided by the "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind. Seemingly resolving the distinction between popular talent and artistic genius, the singer's highly successful tour of the United States in 1850-52 influenced conceptions of the possibilities for women in public. Lind, particularly as marketed by P.T. Barnum, combined spectacle and sublimity in idealized feminine performance. The *New-York Tribune* of 12 September 1850, reporting in great detail on Lind's American debut, claims that what "won the world to Jenny Lind" is "that her whole soul and being goes out in her song, and that her voice becomes the impersonation of that song's soul . . . There is plainly no vanity in her, no mere aim to effect; it is all frank and real and harmoniously earnest" ("Jenny"). The ideal woman artist's expression operates through sympathetic connection rather than aesthetic construction, the writer suggests, in keeping with the period's essentialist view of gender. As Barbara Welter explains, "Most authorities on anatomy and gynecology agreed that woman's cerebral system was less developed, her nervous system better developed than man's" (71). In this view, a woman's positive moral and emotional qualities, and any artistic ability, were predicated on her physical and mental deficiency. According to Lesley Ferris, the common view was that "far from being credited with artistic invention, skill, or talent, [women] merely *play themselves*" (xi). Whether as actresses, public speakers, or writers, this assumption of women's transparency both enabled and limited their public influence.

American theaters in the mid-century were sites where class, race, and gender conflicts were acted out both for and by audiences. Theater historian Richard Butsch notes that, until the end of the nineteenth century, the class distinction between theaters had less to do with the plays offered than with the decorum of the audience and the presence (or absence) of women, respectable or not (402.n35). The expansion of public theaters in the 1840s was quickly followed by attempts to separate the middle and elite from working class audiences, which were chiefly male and frequently raucous. New York City, for example, catered to the working class with offerings at the Bowery, the middle at Niblo's Garden, and elite at Astor Place (complete with dress code) (Butsch 378). Many believed theater might be "reformed" through the values of middle-class domesticity, represented by the profusion of sentimental dramas and melodramas, most notably *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in the early 1850s. The entertainment industry, Richard Brodhead argues, had its origins in the cult of domesticity, "taking the literature produced for domestic consumption as one of its first sites of industrial development" (60).[8] The domestication and "feminization" of theater took material form, as well, through banning prostitutes and cutting down on rowdy outbursts (Butsch 387), to cutting the typical bill from five to six hours of various entertainments to one full-length play (Fisher and Watts xx). Seating and theater interiors also changed, as stalls gradually replace the pit, seats could be reserved, and the décor became more luxurious (Fisher and Watts xx).[9] Reformed theaters were only the first of several commercial establishments, including department stores and ice cream parlors, created for women in the mid-century (Butsch 377). By the 1870s, Bruce McConachie writes, "the hegemony of the American business class pervaded the theatre" and norms of "respectability" regulated audience behavior, audiences which were by that time evenly male and female in composition ("American" 174-5). By 1880, thirty-five-hundred U.S. towns enjoyed regular

theatrical performances, with some five-thousand playhouses served by two-hundred-fifty stock companies and five-thousand actors (Wilmeth & Bigsby 19).

By 1870, there were more women working as actresses than nurses, writers, or lawyers; the only profession employing more women was teaching (Dudden 180). Kim Marra notes that after the Civil War, the managerial role (formerly held by a leading actor or actress) evolved into a separate occupation, with the impresario/producer/director tailoring the production to meet his artistic vision (xiv). As men managed, women became the primary stage stars (xv). Like the acceptance of women in theater audiences, however, the increase in women on stage was not the result of the women's movement but entrepreneurs' search for new markets. In large part, the popularity of women on stage represented an expansion of her domestic role. Lesley Ferris explains that when Western mining camps experienced a shortage of women, "the popular female performer in a sense solved the demand for women by allowing a collection of males to share one woman" (143). Extending the mothering function of women from domestic space to the public stage, however, did not empower women in any real sense. Mary Ryan notes that while women functioned primarily as figures and characters representing private values in antebellum public ceremonies, after the war attention shifted to women's bodies: "Women were no longer allegorical, hardly even symbolic; their bodies in themselves were ceremoniously presented for public view" (31, 46). From a "transitive semiotic device" earlier in the century, the female body on the public stage became a spectacle (Ryan 28). Similar developments (and limitations) shaped women's increasing involvement in period oratorical practice, as well.

Terry Baxter writes that oratory was "the preeminent American art form" in the antebellum period, disseminated not only in live performance, but with entire texts of popular and political addresses commonly printed in periodicals (37). Lawrence Levine, too, notes that

American culture in the nineteenth-century "enshrined the art of oratory" and possessed "a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for the spoken word" (36). While rhetorical instruction was given to young women in mid-century American colleges, they were posited most often in the role of audience.[10] Nineteenth-century school readers adjusted coverage and content according to gender: those targeting a male audience covered the full range of elocutionary matter, addressing both gestural and vocal elements of delivery, while those directed toward a female or mixed-sex audience limited coverage chiefly to vocal elements (Buchanan 7). According to Lindal Buchanan, school readers typically recognized young women as listeners, and focused on giving them information for evaluating others' public performances, and for enhancing their own private conversations, rather than preparing them to speak in public (17, 29). For the female student, oratorical training was most useful in her development and cultivation of taste. Contemporary advice manuals, discussed in works by Karen Halttunen and Nan Johnson, argued that normative self-presentation in appearance and verbal behavior were essential to both women's social success and rhetorical power.

Abolitionist women had been speaking (to other women) in private homes since the 1830s but, by the 1850s, large numbers of women were addressing mixed audiences in public (Cmiel 71).[11] The physical presence of a woman on the public stage, regardless of the message she offered, had implications for existing social power relations. As Frederic Jameson has noted, the gaze represents a blatant power relation, restricting to the privileged the "right to look" (7). According to Carol Mattingly, the most frequent cry against women speakers was not the content of their speech but their addressing what were called "promiscuous audiences" (both men and women): "That women could usurp the power of looking directly at (and often down on) men was shocking" (138). The examples of prominent women speakers like Susan B. Anthony and

Elizabeth Cady Stanton "and the rhetorical space these women occupied in the shaping of political and cultural life" should be regarded as the exception rather than the rule, according to Johnson (49). While some women were able to gain the public's ear and further social reform, Johnson points out that they did so not by resisting gender codes but playing to them, and that their efforts did not alter the public's view of the speaking stage as male territory (144). Even at progressive educational institutions, conventional relations were difficult to overcome. By 1858, women students at Oberlin College were allowed to read their compositions at graduation (previously only permitted attendance in rhetoric classes) with the understanding they kept their eyes lowered (Mattingly 138).

Like period oratory, women's engagement in public religious practice was closely tied to involvement with reform efforts, moral uplift, and charitable institutions, and similarly grounded in the requirement that their contributions remain domestic and sentimental in nature. Ann Douglas's *Feminization of American Culture* (1977), as well as more recent works by Anne Braude (2001) and Ann Taves (1999), detail women's centrality to religious culture in the mid-century period. Two-thirds of those who converted during the Second Great Awakening were women, and preachers adapted their approaches to this influential majority by easing harsh Calvinist doctrines, emphasizing the heart and home as the center of religious life (Eberwein, "Is" 89).[12] Evangelicalism, as a conversion-oriented theology, replaced the doctrine of total human depravity with the idea that sanctification was a cooperative process involving both God and man. Overall, the culture of revivalism foregrounded a shared evangelical style that encouraged cooperation among sects, leading to women's involvement in benevolent societies, temperance efforts, and Bible distribution. Mary Kelley explains that the missionary movement drew hundreds of women West (and others overseas) in the mid-century, fueled by "a religiously

inflected nationalism that obligated Americans to bring the entire world into the evangelical fold" (125). The rise of Spiritualism in the late 1840s was particularly productive for women of the lower and middle classes, who were its primary practitioners (as mediums) and took public leadership roles in spreading its message. Braude notes that trance mediums formed the first large group of American women to speak in public or to exercise religious leadership (xix). Female moral influence was seen as a vital mechanism for change and, Alex Owen argues, Spiritualist women were seen as "the embodiment of the Evangelical ideal," mediums of intercourse with heaven (10). The growth of the movement during the Civil War was attributable both to the large numbers of dead and increasing skepticism toward traditional religious belief and practice. While many women assumed public roles in social and religious movements, the underlying ideology and organizing force of most remained deeply patriarchal.

Increased prominence as writers in the mid-century, like involvement in theater, oratory, and religion, gave women public exposure but also subjected them to greater scrutiny. Janet Gray argues, "Women pioneered writing as a paying occupation, and for most of the century, women writers and readers dominated the American literary marketplace" (xxx). As editor (1837-1877) of *Godey's Lady's Book*, which had a circulation of 150,000 by 1860, Sarah Josepha Hale encouraged readers to consider themselves actively engaged in public conversations through their involvement with print culture (Tonkovich 166). Many male authors, including Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, were distressed by the cultural power and popularity of women writers, which they equated with the threat of readers' tyranny over (male) writers (Knoper 140). Lucy Newlyn describes the genre hierarchy placing poetry above the novel within Romantic ideology: the rapid turnover, printing, and circulation of novels was tied directly to women's bodies and conceived as "a reproductive capacity which had got out of

control" (323). Women writers of the mid-century were limited not by publishing opportunities, Naomi Sofer argues, but by "the absence of diverse and flexible models for female intellectual and artistic work" (3). Cheryl Walker similarly contends that the "greatest danger women artists have faced has been, not oppression and hostility toward them, but their own internalization of the attitudes of the oppressors" (7). How women read themselves as "written" by culture influenced their own writing.[13] According to Wolosky, many women responded by assuming a "modest self-presentation" in their writing; modesty represented "a challenge, but also a medium, for female representation" (*Poetry* 13). While theater culture was thought to be improved by women's presence (as audience), the successful woman writer threatened to degrade the profession and the literary form at once. Still, over sixteen-hundred U.S. women published volumes of poetry in the nineteenth century (Bennett, *Poets* 18), and no less than four anthologies devoted exclusively to American women poets were published in the 1840s.

The paradoxical empowerment and objectification of women in public in the American mid-century contributed to the pervasiveness of representations of performance in women's poetry, as detailed in the chapters that follow. I contextualize close readings of poems with content from writers' biographies, correspondence, contemporary reading materials, and related cultural histories, in order to place their work more squarely within the circumstances of public life in nineteenth-century America. Attention to performance as subject matter and setting in poetry leads to productive readings of the terms (both linguistic and social) under which women assumed a voice in mid-century culture. The poetic form itself provided a distancing – a persona to complicate readers' assumptions of the speaker as woman writer – allowing them to play with and against social expectations and literary conventions at once, utilizing the form for critical

and potentially subversive ends. In this way, poetry about performance becomes a performance itself.

Over the next four chapters, I examine works by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Sarah Piatt (1836-1919), Fanny Kemble (1809-1893), Adah Menken (1835-1868), and Achsa Sprague (1827-1862). Chapter One discusses Emily Dickinson's poems on sermonic oratory, conversion, and social mourning practices in the Congregationalist tradition. Dickinson's poetry also addresses popular entertainments – the circus, ballet, musical concerts – and the shift from didactic to commercial discourses in the mid-century. Dickinson is most interested in the totality of the public speech event, and the linguistic insecurity (and possibility) generated through gaps in expression and reception. This chapter reconsiders Dickinson's reticence as a creative response to the demands of performance culture, extending earlier performance-related studies on the poet by Judith Pascoe, Páraic Finnerty, Elizabeth Phillips, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristianne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith. Chapter Two explores the poetry of popular mid-century performers Fanny Kemble, an actress and Shakespeare reader, and Adah Menken, the infamous breeches performer, detailing how both counter the abstraction of female publicity with the specificity of a singular interiority "overheard" through poetic form. Through writing, each engages with contemporary discourses on celebrity, genius, and the female body, in order to conceive and display a unified artistic self. Tailoring performances to distinct audiences (Kemble's middle- and upper-class and Menken's working-class), they show how publics and performers are mutually constituted. Previous scholarship on both considers their stage performances and prose writings, but rarely poetry (excepting work by Gregory Eiselein on Menken).

Spiritualist trance lecturer Achsa Sprague is the subject of Chapter Three, which describes how she utilized mediumship as a mode of rhetorical influence in performances and published writings, alike. Poems on religious practice, public lecture, and the Civil War reveal the simultaneously compromising and empowering conditions of the medium's "womanly appeal." Sprague's Spiritualist poetry has been addressed by Eliza Richards, but this chapter constitutes the first study dedicated to Sprague's verse as a whole. Finally, Chapter Four addresses Sarah Piatt's poems on maternal storytelling, child's play, and mourning rituals. Viewed through Piatt's postbellum skepticism, the social practices and literary conventions of sentimental domesticity prove inadequate, and even harmful, to women's lives. Piatt has enjoyed increased attention in recent years, from Paula Bennett's edited collection of her verse, to Matthew Giordano's treatment of her periodical poetry, and analysis of her child death poetry by Jessica Roberts and Mary McCartin Wearn. My chapter builds on these studies by addressing Piatt's subversion of the role of Mother as scripted by Christian teaching and sentimental culture. Throughout all four chapters, I consider representations of performance in poetry as an indicator of cultural engagement and a potential mode of critique. Regardless of their widely varied relations to and conceptions of public life, each of the five women demonstrates a self-conscious approach to performance culture's implications for her work as poet.

CHAPTER ONE

"An Orator of Feather unto an Audience of Fuzz:"[1]
Sermons, Graveyard Scenes, and the Popular Audience in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Critical attention to Emily Dickinson often focuses on her role as performing subject – the poet's posing through various speakers or personae, her rhetorical engagement with the reading audience, or the carefully constructed "self" presented to select correspondents – but this chapter proposes a new understanding of her relationship to performance. What if, instead of the performance *of* the poems and poet, we look more closely at performance *in* the poems? Her frequent use of theatrical terms (audience, stage, footlights, show, tragedy), explicit references to Shakespeare's plays and characters, critiques of show promoters and orators, repeated use of the stage as a metaphor for life and nature, and her portrayals of audience members and actors in various venues reveal a woman very interested in public enactments of culture. From her earliest experiences with the didactic oratory of Protestant practice and New England pedagogy to later encounters with large-scale commercial productions such as Swedish singer Jenny Lind's American tour, the dynamics of performance had a profound influence on the poet's understanding of social life and language. Considered within this wider frame, poems on the circus, sermons, theater, mourning rituals, revivals, ballet, child's play, and musical concerts show that Dickinson's poetic, in Shira Wolosky's words, "constitutes not a formalist self-reflective aesthetic, but a register of her world" (*Poetry* 30). We cannot fully understand Dickinson as poet-performer, I argue, without first considering her role as audience member to mid-century culture.

Complicating the narrative of the reclusive "myth of Amherst," and related arguments regarding lyric subjectivity, Dickinson's interest in performance can be read as a sign of

engagement (however unconventional) with the world, rather than an attempt to escape from it. Drastic changes in national politics, social mores, the economy, industrialization, education, and mass communication contributed to her fear of, and fascination with, the new, highly performative, America. In the mid-century, in Alan Ackerman's words, "Americans almost obsessively staged themselves for themselves" (28). As detailed in cultural studies by Ackerman, Karen Halttunen, Mary Louise Kete, and others, the obsession with influence and affect in mid-century American culture – the desire to compel change in another or to surrender to it oneself – helps explain Dickinson's desire to address public performance as subject and setting in her work. Reading both her interest and her reserve as a combination of personal proclivities, cultural training, and period tensions, instead of reading them strictly in terms of the poet's own psychology or biography, we can better understand how her poetry responds to the performance anxieties of the age. Domhnall Mitchell writes, "For although the poems often do appear to separate themselves from actualities, or to take the possibility of separation as a perspective to write from and on, they employ a vocabulary that inevitably reveals the presence of those actualities as pressures operating within the text and sometimes governing and undermining its premises" (2). Attention to the "vocabulary" of performance in Dickinson's work reveals how extensively the surrounding culture made its way into her work, even as she remained physically at home.

The academic culture of mid-nineteenth-century Amherst, a conservative New England college town, both enabled and prescribed Dickinson's personal experiences with performance. Lectures, faculty and student presentations, cultural exhibits and concerts, and church events were more prevalent and formative for Dickinson than theatrical productions or political speeches.[2] The didactic function highlighted in such presentations established an expectation that

the learned and authoritative performer would instruct uninformed and inexperienced listeners – the "orator of feather unto an audience of fuzz" referenced in my title, used by Dickinson to illustrate this conventional performance dynamic (L195). This assumption of the performer's superiority, and his authority to represent and speak for the community as a whole, informs many of Dickinson's early poems on performance. Both her schooling at Amherst Academy (1840-47) and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (1847-48) and her experiences in the Congregationalist Church highlighted a similar interplay of instruction and performance, along with the requirement that students and Church members publicly display their own successful uptake of those lessons.[3] Children in Amherst began early, according to Rowena Revis Jones, memorizing the Shorter Catechism from Isaac Watts's *New England Primer,* reciting from Noah Webster's *The American Spelling Book*, and using Joseph Emerson's question-and-answer "Hints" to guide them through declamation of Watts's *The Improvement of the Mind* (306-7). Emblematic of contemporary didactic performance as a whole, catechism – a question-and-answer form of religious instruction – was closer to the scripted dialogue of the stage than genuine communicative exchange.[4] Dickinson intuited that the power and authority of didactic performance derived from repetition and convention, rather than revelation or discovery. A performance reading of Dickinson's poetry suggests her own reticence was a subversive response to such carefully scripted social dynamics.

Dickinson's schooling at Amherst and Holyoke established a gendered and text-based relationship to performance that also contributed to her unique treatment of it in poetry. Both schools taught Shakespeare not as dramatic literature, to be read silently or staged theatrically, but as declamation or rhetoric (Ackerman 14; Finnerty 21).[5] Like drama, poetry was considered potentially dangerous reading material and, for girls, "best read in a visibly disciplined

pedagogical context" (Loeffelholz 30). What we call literature was then "a species of epideictic discourse" intended to edify rather than entertain its audience (Clark and Haloran 2). According to Lindal Buchanan, mid-century rhetorical instruction and school readers typically positioned girls as listeners and focused on giving them information for evaluating others' public performances, and for enhancing their own private conversations, rather than preparing them to speak in public (17, 29). Reading itself was taught and practiced as an oral rather than a silent skill until nearly the end of the nineteenth-century and, as a result, the majority of Dickinson's exposure to drama and poetry was through academic lessons in rhetoric and recitation (Buchanan 12). Even after she stopped attending public events, she continued to read speeches, lectures, and reviews in newspapers (her family had lifelong subscriptions to several local papers and national periodicals), which published entire texts of sermons, lectures, and political addresses.[6]

Dickinson's experiences in the Congregationalist Church similarly positioned her to receive and repeat content, rather than produce it herself. Preaching was, for Dickinson, an aesthetic activity, and she both judged and enjoyed it as such, but revivalism also exposed *her* to criticism, as one unwilling or unable to acknowledge God's call and join the church community. New England Congregationalist orthodoxy of the day, with its emphasis on the doctrine of Unconditional Election, required the individual to submit both to God's will and the church's judgment. Another aspect of Calvinist doctrine that fascinated and frightened Dickinson, as noted by James McIntosh, was the doctrine of Irresistible Grace, which says that when God calls a person to conversion, the experience is so powerful that even sinful human beings cannot reject it (5). Roger Lundin explains that, "in claiming Christ, one also claimed membership in the fellowship of believers by making public testimony to the grace of God" (49). In Dickinson's time, the candidate was subject to examination by the pastor and deacons, who were charged

with determining the veracity of conversion. The sermon, then, seeks to bring audience members to acceptance of their own selection by God, a selection beyond personal control but requiring personal testimony as proof. This combination of power, enacting the Word Made Flesh through testimony, and powerlessness, lack of personal agency in securing or resisting God's call, is what fascinated Dickinson most and aligned it, in her mind, with other forms of performance. The individual's salvation is strangely impersonal and subject to – even constituted by – public performance, convention, and scrutiny.

Her limited travels and attendance at public events have been treated fully by biographers including Richard Sewall and Páraic Finnerty, but Dickinson did attend a number of live commercial entertainment events. We know that she attended a performance by the Hutchinson Family singers at Mount Holyoke, at least two musical concerts in Boston in 1846, singer Jenny Lind in Northampton in 1851, and the Germania Musical Society in 1854.[7] Beyond this, Dickinson followed popular entertainments in the newspapers and discussed them in great detail with correspondents, particularly her brother, Austin, who shared her interests in dramatic theater and music. Through her extensive reading, Jack Capps argues, Dickinson "was able to gain intelligence of the society of her correspondents without having to venture into it physically" (134).[8] Her textual relation to commercial performance culture – experiencing it largely through written transcriptions and second-hand descriptions rather than live performance – accounts, in part, for the unique critical stance she assumes toward it in her poetry. She recognizes that the show itself is only one part of the larger public event generated through advertising, media coverage, reviews, and public opinion. With so much of its performance "in print," the entertainment event likely had automatic associations, for Dickinson, with her own public writing aspirations.

Dickinson's performance poems trace similarities between the instruction offered in school and church, the indoctrination enacted through social ritual, and the spectacular diversion of popular entertainment. In her encounters with culture, Dickinson finds that the words and techniques of public performance remain consistent, regardless of whether they claim a truth or stage a fiction, a distinction Richard Schechner terms the "make belief" of social performance and the "make believe" of theatrical performance (35). Tensions between didactic and commercial discourses within contemporary performance culture mask their shared goal: to secure an audience and affect its belief. In fact, both assume a causal, and thus controllable, relation between act and effect in performance, and operate on the premise that an appropriate show will produce an appropriate response (conversion or applause, respectively) from audiences. Where the didactic environment stresses the role of the receiving audience in successful performance, however, show business places pressure on the performer. Considering the performance dynamic in its various forms, Dickinson's poetry explores the risk involved for any individual – audience member or performer – who dares to challenge the social power authorizing public spectacle, its approved meanings, and intended consequences.

Dickinson's use of performance as subject matter and setting in her poetry can also help us make better sense of other recurring themes in her work such as metaphysical uncertainty, the terrors of mortality, and anxieties about poetic creation. Focusing first on her own experiences with didactic performance, Dickinson explores the emotional vulnerability of the individual audience member against the authority of public opinion. Poems on the sermon and conversion address both expectations for conventional reception and the resisting listener's attempts to subvert them. Next, poems on deathbed and gravesite rituals show participants as social actors and audiences at once, aiming to "make real" the promise of salvation. Turning finally to

commercial entertainment, Dickinson focuses on the physical vulnerability of the public performer and the frightening power of the popular audience. This inversion of the earlier power dynamic within performance would have profound implications for Dickinson's own creative acts.

Sermonic Oratory and the Reluctant Convert

"[B]e not ashamed / Of Me – in Christ's bright Audience"
Fr774, lines 10-11

The first performance stage Dickinson encountered was undoubtedly the pulpit of the First Church of Amherst, where sermonic oratory provided the poet her most direct and extended experiences with public performance. During her period of regular attendance at church (1840-1865), Beth Maclay Doriani estimates that Dickinson heard over 1500 sermons (57). As Sewall notes, she was, like her father and brother, "hard to please" and highly critical of poor performances at the pulpit, but this had as much to do with contemporary performance culture and practice as any familial or personal idiosyncrasy (359). Dickinson's letter to brother Austin, dated 5 June 1853, demonstrates how evaluation of such performances was a family affair. Dickinson is here referring to a sermon by Rev. Martin Leland: "I listened to him this forenoon in a state of mind very near frenzy, and feared the effect too much to go out this afternoon. The morning exercises were perfectly ridiculous, and we spent the intermission in mimicking the Preacher, and reciting extracts from his most memorable sermon. I never heard Father so funny. How I wish you were here. I know you'd have died laughing" (L125). Terry Baxter, writing of the antebellum rhetorical culture in which Dickinson was raised, notes that church sermons "gave the largest portion of Americans their first and most frequent exposure to speech making" and that many attendees "applied the same consumer logic to them that they did other forms of

entertainment" (51). Approaching religious practice as oratorical performance, Dickinson deemed that it was subject to the same criticism, questions, and challenges she, as student, might direct toward any other form of public speaking. Dickinson's treatment of the sermon as public speech demonstrates the critical self-consciousness that marks her, according to McIntosh, as "a child of her questioning age as well as of Congregationalist orthodoxy" (63). Raised in the Connecticut Valley Calvinist tradition, Dickinson was also influenced by the era's "liberalism" through sources such as Emersonian Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, and Christian feminism. Rather than revering the language of Christian practice as sacred Word, Dickinson's speakers place it squarely within the earthly realm, analyzing its human spokesmen, delivery, and effects (both intended and unexpected) as social performance.

The fact that the period of Dickinson's most aggressive exposure to the sermon coincided with her advanced instruction in rhetoric (1844-48) likely accounts for her uncommon insights into religious performance. As a sensitive and well-educated audience member, her experience of the sermon was colored by theoretical considerations of its rhetorical function, strategies, and goals. In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson after her father's death in 1874, Dickinson recalls a sermon she heard in childhood and how she interpreted the minister's message through her knowledge of rhetoric. Dickinson writes, "When a few years old, I was taken to a funeral which I now know was of peculiar distress, and the clergyman asked, 'Is the arm of the Lord Shortened, that it cannot save?' He italicized the 'cannot.' I mistook the accent for a doubt of Immortality, and not daring to ask, it besets me still, though we know that the mind of the heart must live if its clerical part do not" (Todd 292-3). Ebenezer Porter's *Rhetorical Reader*, Dickinson's textbook at Amherst Academy, tells students in a lesson on inflection that words printed in italics "contain the vowel sounds on which the stress and quantity are to be laid" and

that the speaker should "acquire the habit of dwelling on the vowel" for effect (901). It seems that in Dickinson's case, the listener, too, *dwells* on it, though as a point for meditative reflection rather than rhetorical effect. Dickinson here exemplifies what Tracy C. Davis terms the "engaged but not absorbed watcher" who thinks about the performance rather than sympathizing with it (154). Dickinson's explanation of "seeing" the accent as italicized when she hears the words spoken reflects her tendency to interpret performances literally, experiencing them as embodied rhetoric, and studying their strategies and effects. In her example, the speaker's expression produced an effect on his listener, but precisely the opposite of the one he intended. Instead of a rhetorical question, conveying a heightened sense of God's power and mercy, Dickinson heard an actual question, endorsing her own doubt.

Though lacking the "fire and brimstone" of earlier Calvinist preaching, Protestant sermons of Dickinson's day still aimed, as Doriani notes, "to engage their listeners in the immediacy and ultimacy of their messages" through the minister's "verbal force" and "energy" (59). Jay Fliegelman explains that the language of antebellum oratorical practice was composed not of words themselves, "but of the tones, gestures, and expressive countenance with which a speaker delivered those words. Consequently, an orator's primary obligation was no longer to communicate thoughts and feelings. Rather, it was to display persuasively and spontaneously the experiencing of those thoughts and feelings" (2). The minister's physicality in representing God's Word attempts to bring the Christian narrative of salvation to life for audiences, and to invite their own embodied response in the form of conversion. Paradoxically, however, this physicality is evoked to argue the insignificance of the body in relation to the power of everlasting spirit. As Dickinson explores in the poem "I've heard an Organ, talk sometimes - " (Fr211), it seems to represent a disconnect between the rhetorical technique and intended lesson

of the sermon. As idealized by its practitioners, and experienced by the receptive listener in/speaker of the poem, religious performance transcends language itself and assumes the "heft" of music.

> I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes -
> In a Cathedral Aisle,
> And understood no word it said -
> Yet held my breath, the while -
>
> And risen up - and gone away,
> A more Bernardine Girl -
> Yet - knew not what was done to me
> In that old Chapel Aisle.

The poem's Catholic overtones suggest Dickinson's criticism of Protestant practice, given its claims of a more conscious experience of faith. The speaker admits to the mysterious, transformative effect, seemingly defying both will and understanding, of the organ's sounds. In contrast to the mastery of sight, Katie Peterson argues, "[s]ound tends to provoke a kind of humility . . . sound requires a willingness to place oneself in jeopardy" (79). Here, the conforming listener's transformation is sexually suggestive – "what was done to me" – but also indicative of a perfectly-accomplished baptism, a sacrament which, as Linda Freedman points out, "mark[s] an experience of passivity and receptivity in the face of God" (25). Dickinson's dramatization of the Calvinist doctrine of Irresistible Grace from the believing audience member's perspective epitomizes the correct response to the sermon, according to Congregationalist practice.

In letters, too, Dickinson represents the conversion pressure distinctly as a voice that, while it does not address her personally, she is aware of through its effects on those who have heard and answered. Letters to Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey from 1850 repeat the image of a "still small voice" and the profound change it brings to even the appearance of the converted.[9]

For Abiah, she describes the revival atmosphere: ". . . how the 'still, small voice' is calling, and how people are listening, and believing, and truly obeying, how the place is very solemn and sacred, and the bad ones slink away and are sorrowful, not at their wicked lives, but at this strange time, great change . . . I ask what this message *means* that they ask for so very eagerly" (L36). To Jane, she remarks that "the 'still small voice' grows earnest and rings, and returns, and lingers, and all the faces of good men shine, and bright halos come around them; and the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed. It *certainly* comes from God – and I think to receive it is blessed – not that I know it from *me*, but from those on whom *change* has passed" (L35). Intimations of inadequacy in her response to the revival atmosphere contributed to Dickinson's social isolation and self-consciousness. Sewall reports that eight revivals swept Amherst during her formative years, 1840-1862, though Dickinson participated most directly in those held in Amherst beginning in 1844 and at Mount Holyoke Seminary in South Hadley in 1847-48 (24).[10] Mary Lyon, preceptress of Mount Holyoke, divided her incoming students into three groups: the "Christians," the "Hopers," and the "No-Hopers." Dickinson was among the final group, those "who could not attest to faith in Christ" (Sewall 360-1; Lundin 40-1). Sewall notes the "continuous religious pressure" involved in attending thrice-weekly conversion assemblies, as well as special meetings for those reluctant to commit. By resisting, Dickinson was, in Barton Levi St. Armand's words, "caught between the stern rock of her Calvinist upbringing and the hard place created by her own uncompromising conscience" (48). Where the successful convert, like the "more Bernardine Girl" of the previous poem, responds in kind to the minister's visceral displays, Dickinson herself was, while certainly not unmoved, either unwilling or unable to offer the conventional answer.

While animated sermonic delivery aims to model its impression on listeners, in Dickinson's poems it more often complicates the minister's hoped-for effects. "This World is not conclusion" (Fr373) begins well enough, with doctrinal assertion, but becomes mired in the gross physicality of scripture communicated through sound and body language:

> Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -
> Strong Hallelujahs roll -
> Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
> That nibbles at the soul -

In a striking reversal of the faith embodied in sacrament – transforming Word into flesh – doubt here takes on a distinct physicality of its own; the minister's forceful message is ineffectual, as it dulls but does not "still the Tooth" of doubt.[11] From the speaker's point of view, the poem's structure – a definitive doctrinal statement which devolves into an expression of personal doubt – helps to reveal how repetitive social performance masks, but does not alleviate, private skepticism.[12] In a letter to Susan Huntington (Dickinson), from 27 June 1852, Dickinson mocks the histrionics of sermonic oratory:

> While the minister this morning was giving an account of the Roman Catholic system, and announcing several facts which were usually startling, I was trying to make up my mind w'h of the two was prettiest to go and welcome you in, my fawn colored dress, or my blue dress. Just as I had decided by all means to wear the blue, down came the minister's fist with a terrible rap on the counter, and Susie, it scared me so, I hav'nt got over it yet, but I'm glad I reached a conclusion! (L96)

Dickinson points out how her experience of the sermon differs from believers' as she humorously places the intended effect of the sermon, to inspire fear, as secondary to her own personal decision on which dress to wear. The word "conclusion," mentioned in both poem and letter, highlights the difference between the performer's intended lesson on the Christian soul's transcendence of death (which is "not conclusion") and the audience member's secular concern with dressing for her worldly companion. The audience member understands the meaning and

even the intended impact of the minister's display, but it fails to translate into the hoped-for effect.

Dickinson's poetry repeatedly dramatizes this type of mis-firing or failed communication within performance as an opportunity for creative, rather than conventional, production of meaning. Experiencing "language as phenomena," as Timothy Gould terms it (33), Dickinson's speakers explore the conflict between individual will and social rule involved in all acts of reception and interpretation. With the assumption that resolute faith is the only logical response to religious performance, it is no wonder that Dickinson famously admitted, "Sermons on unbelief ever did attract me" (L176). The possibility that one can understand a statement without believing it is something that J. L. Austin termed the gap between sense and force, or the act's meaning and its actual consequence (116). The pressure to equate the two – and the social power behind such pressure – results in a "tyranny of sense," which Gould argues "tries to dictate to us the 'business' of language" (41). Rather than succumbing to this pressure, Dickinson reverses the dynamic by receiving the literal force of the minister's display but interpreting it in her own way. Instead of taking the minister's message on the relative inconsequence of the flesh to heart, Dickinson humorously re-casts his explosive "rap" on the counter as a helpful (though admittedly jarring) confirmation of her own materialist resolve. A similarly playful resistance to the conventional dictates of religious performance is displayed in her poetry through speakers who replace the believing listener's receptivity with a consumer's criticality.

Comparing religious performance – scriptural as well as sermonic – to a travelling play, a menagerie, and a speech by a conman, Dickinson makes a strong statement regarding belief and the means used to secure it. Mixing sacred and commercial discourses, she merges religion and show business, the most overtly public, market-driven aspect of performance. One example,

"The Bible is an antique Volume - " (Fr1577), lists biblical subjects and figures in the form of a playbill:

> Subjects - Bethlehem -
> Eden - the ancient Homestead -
> Satan - the Brigadier -
> Judas - the Great Defaulter -
> David - the Troubadour
> Sin - a distinguished Precipice

The speaker's distance from the biblical text as scripture is powerfully conveyed as she re-casts revered figures into conventional dramatic, even melodramatic, roles that will spark popular interest. The frequency of writers' use of the playbill, including Melville's in *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Twain's in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) speaks to its ubiquity in the American experience of the latter half of the century. Here, the speaker suggests the story itself has the makings of great theater, if only it had a "warbling Teller" to bring it to life (13).

In "A transport one cannot contain" (Fr212), Dickinson similarly compares the rapture of religious conversion to the popular, commercialized production of a menagerie by satirizing the audience demand for spectacle:

> A Diagram - of Rapture!
> A sixpence at a show -
> With Holy Ghosts in Cages!
> The *Universe* would go!

Either God or his agent, the minister, acts as ringmaster here, carefully containing the promised transport of immortality into the more manageable, and readily consumable, form of conversion: "God forbid it lift the lid, / Unto it's Extasy!" (3-4). Caging the Holy Spirit for display, however, makes it an object of pity rather than awe; the audience's need for proof destroys the very mystery it seeks to reveal. Like the commodification of oratory more generally, which Baxter notes "was treated as a medium of entertainment, almost as though it were a sport, sought for its

pleasing qualities and competing with plays and circuses for audiences," the sermon became a show (39). The impossibility of "seeing" immortality is precisely what makes faith necessary, Dickinson suggests, but also what inhibits belief in a consumerist age. Rather than a statement on her own desire for animated sermons, as they are often read, such poems more pointedly demonstrate the paradox of representing a transcendent vision through embodied performance.

"He preached opon 'Breadth' till it argued him narrow - " (Fr1266) takes this one step further, inverting the conventional power dynamic of learned speaker and lacking listener in didactic performance. Here, the audience member pronounces judgment on the overly ambitious minister's piety:

> He preached opon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow -
> The Broad are too broad to define
> And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar -
> The Truth never flaunted a Sign -
>
> Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
> As Gold the Pyrites would shun -
> What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
> To meet so enabled a Man!

Richard Green Parker's *Aids to English Composition*, used by Dickinson at Amherst, advises, "A preacher must be simple and grave," and to that end instructs sermon writers to carefully choose only scripture which clearly offers "the complete sense of the sacred writer" and a definitive doctrinal angle (391). "[O]nly impertinent and foolish people," Parker argues, "will attempt to preach from one or two words which signify nothing" (390). Considered in the context of Parker's instruction, our preacher's subjects of "'Breadth'" and "'Truth'" are far too abstract for effective sermonizing, thus amounting to just "two words which signify nothing."

Parker further cautions, "There must not be too much genius. I mean, not too many brilliant, sparkling, and shining things [in a sermon]: for they would produce very bad effects.

The auditor will never fail to say, 'The man preaches himself, aims to display his genius, and is not animated by the spirit of God, but by that of the world'" (391). The poem seems to respond to this in its final lines, "What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus / To meet so enabled a Man!" Instead of speaking on behalf of Jesus, as he claims to do, the minister re-creates Him in his own image. Ironically, the minister's poor performance does not endanger either the sermon's message or its intended effect, it simply alters how it is accomplished; the minister's failure to embody Christ's innocence makes His imagined goodness all the more vivid to the believing listener. Dickinson's empowered audience member represents not an outright rejection of doctrine, but a different type of piety – the idealized listener's vulnerability to the sound of the sermon, epitomized in "I've heard an Organ, talk sometimes - ," is replaced by the self-conscious listener's power to judge the sermonizer's displays against God's Word.[13]

Dickinson's own complicated relationship to Congregationalist preaching is perhaps best captured in a poem representing the transience of faith as a travelling show that "dazzle[s]" and then quietly moves on. Although the "Heaven" in "I've known a Heaven, like a Tent - " (Fr257) has often been interpreted as referring to a natural phenomenon, it can also refer to a religious experience with Dickinson comparing the "Heaven" brought to life in a sermon to the appearance of a circus in town.[14] Where the experience of the successful convert focused on the sound of God's call, here there is only a haunted silence:

> I've known a Heaven, like a Tent -
> To wrap it's shining Yards -
> Pluck up it's stakes, and disappear -
> Without the sound of Boards
> Or Rip of Nail - Or Carpenter -
> But just the miles of Stare -
> That signalize a Show's Retreat -
> In North America -
>
> No Trace - no Figment - of the Thing

That dazzled, Yesterday,
No Ring - no Marvel -
Men, and Feats -
Dissolved as utterly -
As Bird's far Navigation
Discloses just a Hue -
A plash of Oars, a Gaiety -
Then swallowed up, of View.

The sermon builds up a "Heaven" – creates it out of thin air, as it were – as the travelling show constructs its temporary tent of stakes, boards, and "shining Yards" of fabric (2).[15] Both sermon and circus, the speaker reflects, have their "Ring . . . Marvel . . . Men, and Feats;" each appears as another of the myriad stagings seeking an audience. The promise of both "Dissolve[s]" as the show retreats from one town to take its offerings elsewhere, suggesting the touring revival or camp meeting popular within the period's evangelical revivalism. The poem focuses not on the performance itself, but on its leave-taking of the town and feelings of abandonment in those left behind: "just the miles of Stare - / That signalize a Show's Retreat - / in North America." Instead of the transport of religious conversion, the poem's speaker is left with "just the miles of Stare" between herself and the retreating vision.

Dickinson's use of the circus in this poem recalls her many references to them in letters throughout her life. The pleasure she took in the pageantry and predictability of such displays applied also to the vision of Heaven offered in religious performance; she was an ambivalent participant in public culture, but never a disinterested one. In a letter of May 1873 to cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross, Dickinson writes, "There was a circus, too, and I watched it away at half-past three that morning" (L390). The material deconstruction and departure of the circus is a reminder that the visions seen under its big top are produced and packaged for consumption, and subject to end. Throughout Dickinson's poetry and letters, endings are a "solemn" affair (Fr907) because they require her to part with an event, vision, or relationship in which she has

become invested. In her letters, Dickinson never speaks of attending a circus, only appreciating it from afar – either watching it pass on the street, or seeing the tents from the house windows or doors (L318, L372, L412, L506). The temporariness of the performance event and its visions – like the pleasures of mortal life when contrasted with the promise of immortality – did not diminish its value for Dickinson, but made it all the more precious.

Dickinson is often more interested in the aftermath of performance – the breaking down of the stage, the leave-taking of performers, the emptiness experienced by the audience once the show is over – than the performance in and of itself. This focus on ends allows her to come to terms with what performance "means" to those who resist or avoid its intended influence or message, those left unsatisfied or unconvinced by its offerings. Sewall writes that her "imagination was . . . prophetic, or apocalyptic, looking more to the end of things than to the beginnings" (445). Attention to the endings of sermonic performance transitions into a treatment of performances of endings, including deathbed scenes, mourning rituals and gravesite etiquette, which more nearly approach Dickinson's "Flood subject," immortality (L319).

Death and Dying as Social Performance

"Because in going is a Drama / Staying cannot confer –"
Fr1366, lines 5-6

The experience of the sermon was not just, or even primarily, about religious doctrine for Dickinson, but more essentially about isolation from the community of the saved, whether that status was gained through conversion or death. Through participation in repetitive religious practices such as revivals and mourning rituals, believers sustained not only individual faith, but communal identity as well. By mid-century, Mary Louise Kete argues, mourning had replaced conversion as "the primary spiritual and social event in the American's life" (59). The Dickinson

home on North Pleasant Street, where she lived from 1840 until 1855, bordered on the Amherst Cemetery and from its windows she likely saw a steady stream of funeral processions (Lundin 27). Poems such as "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (Fr547) demonstrate the regularity, both in frequency and formality, of "that Dark Parade" (20). Roger Lundin argues that Dickinson's early encounters with death "contributed to the sense she shared with her Enlightenment and romantic predecessors that finitude rather than sin was the fundamental human dilemma" (29). In a culture that needed to see in order to believe, faithful and skeptic alike attended the moment of death, hoping the scene might *show* what the minister's sermon could only *tell*.

Beyond Dickinson's personal experiences with death and its aftermath, mid-century culture as a whole was fascinated by the subject. Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, visited by Dickinson when she was fifteen years old, had opened in 1831, the first of many rural cemeteries in America. Mt. Auburn marked a dramatic shift in burial practices and mourning rituals, as it replaced the local churchyard as burial ground for communities. The purpose, as described by Lundin, was to blur distinctions between death and life: "The bucolic settings of these cemeteries, complete with winding paths, gentle slopes, and the profusion of graveside flowers, were meant to reassure the living about the sweet comforts of the dead" (27). The didactic function of the space is also addressed in Dickinson's textbook, *Aids to English Composition*. In a section titled "Elegy and Epitaph," Parker quotes a former student's reflections on the unique art of the epitaph. He points out how the epitaph should instill reverence in those who view it, regardless of the truth of the dead one's character.

> But, though, epitaphs give us, generally, exaggerated characters, yet I would not have it otherwise. Our churchyards should be schools of morality and religion. Every thing we see there, of course, reminds us of death; and it would appear to us sacrilege, if we should behold any record of vice. Since everywhere we find

> virtue ascribed to the tenants of the place, their death, and death in general, will not be to us so terrible and gloomy a subject of reflection; yet will produce such a serious turn of mind as will lead to religious meditation, which has always the effect of calming the passions and facilitates, in a great degree, our conquest over them, and the infrequency of which is the cause of most of our transgressions. (290-1)

Even the lasting record of a mortal's life – the inscription on her gravestone – serves a communal purpose. Parker admits that social Christian practice exists to persuade and edify, and that this "good" justifies any fiction (or embellishment) utilized to achieve it.

While Christians idealize death as the moment of truth – the enactment of faith's victory – Dickinson's poetry explores the rhetorical function and conventions of dying, and its aftermath, as social performance. The paradox of Christianity's delay in "satisfaction" of its promises is one that Dickinson acknowledges and tries to resolve. Dickinson personifies Death, in an 1884 poem (Fr1646), as "The Auctioneer of Parting," combining the sacred moment of death with the profane setting of the auction house. Death's theatrics – "His 'Going, going, gone' / Shouts even from the Crucifix, / And brings his Hammer down –" (2-4) – commercialize his objectives, his desire to strike a deal. As the moment of death does either affirm or deny the individual's faith, it is appropriate for the reluctant convert to figure the event as a business transaction. Put simply, will this investment pay out? Dickinson shared her period's fascination with deathbed scenes, both fictional and real; Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" (1837) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) offer poignant examples of this practice. In 1844, Dickinson demanded access to the deathbed of her friend Sophia Holland. She described the experience to Abiah Root in a letter two years later, which illustrates the intense impact the event must have had on her at the time. Dickinson writes: "There she lay mild and beautiful as in health and her pale features lit up with an unearthly – smile. I looked as long as friends would permit me and when they told me I must look no longer I let them lead me

away . . .” (Sewall 341-2). Her attempt to interpret the look on the dying girl’s face, which she ultimately terms a “smile,” indicates her attempt to read the moment as a text or performance offering some truth. Letters show that Dickinson often asked for information on dead friends’ final moments from those who witnessed their passing. An early example from 1854, written to minister Edward Everett Hale following the death of Benjamin Newton, reads, “I often have hoped to know if his last hours were cheerful, and if he was willing to die” (L153). Dickinson’s desire to witness and learn from others’ deathbed experiences suggests that if the dying go to death happily, then faith must be true.

Dickinson repeatedly highlights mortal limits of vision and knowledge with reference to those truths that are only “seen of angels” (I Timothy 3.16). In fact, it is the angels’ (as well as God’s) refusal to *tell* what they know – particularly what they know of immortality – that is, for Dickinson, most troubling. She contrasts the “learned Angels / In scholastic skies” with human schoolchildren adrift in a sea of doubt (Fr179, 15-16). Dickinson’s speaker threatens to “bribe” heaven for intelligence, if she can secure it no other way (Fr176, 1). The same Godly silence she experienced in revivals, she senses again as a witness to death. The absolute transcendence of the Calvinist deity, according to Magdalena Zapedowska, leads Dickinson to make silence synonymous with God in her poetry: “identified with infinity, consistently capitalized and personified as masculine, silence represents the inaccessible Absolute, unmediated through language and untranslatable into human terms, as terrifying as the ambiguous whiteness of Melville’s whale” (393). The “arrogant silence” of God, the angels, and even the dear departed saints, leaves Dickinson to focus on the loss felt by those left on earth, because only that experience is truly knowable and communicable (Eberwein, *Strategies* 212).

In a letter to Abiah Root in 1848, following the death of tutor Leonard Humphrey, we get what Sewall terms "her first sustained elegiac effort" (341). Here Dickinson describes how the experience of the death of a friend heightens her own feelings of fear and loneliness:

> . . . I am *selfish* too, because I am feeling lonely; some of my friends are gone, and some of my friends are sleeping – sleeping the churchyard sleep – the hour of evening is sad . . . *You* have stood by the grave before; I have walked there sweet summer evenings and read the names on the stones, and wondered who would come and give me the same memorial; but I never have laid my friends there, and forgot that they too must die; this is my first affliction, and indeed 'tis hard to bear it. (qtd. in Sewall 341)

The graveside visitor's interpretation of her emotion as "selfish" makes sense within the Calvinist tradition and even in the context of her rhetorical education. Her privatizing of the emotion, and experiencing it as an irremediable loss, contradicts her training in both. She insists on experiencing the event personally, though religion and rhetoric argue it should be a moral lesson. Christians are taught that grief is the "appropriate response" to death, as it prepares the mourner to receive God's divine grace (Halttunen 129). Like the public cemetery's goal of reassuring the living of their faith, even the "private" emotion of grief serves a didactic purpose within Christian teaching. As she did with sermonic oratory, Dickinson struggles to respond to death both "properly" and honestly.

Religious rituals of mourning – deathbed scenes, gravesite customs, and epitaphs – translate Christian instruction into social practice and such performances of "make belief," as Schechner points out, aim to convince performers as well as their audiences (35). Dickinson understands that the faithful perform for each other and, ultimately, for the approving eye of God himself.[16] Porter's *Rhetorical Reader* may have first suggested to Dickinson the similarity between church and theater that she explores in poems on mourning. In his section on sermonic delivery, Porter recalls an actor's comment to a minister: "We speak of fictions as if they were

realities, you speak of realities as if they were fictions" (62). While actors stage live action to represent a fictional story, ministers argue that the mortal world is unreal when compared to Heaven. Each makes a different, but related, claim on audiences – the sermon asks them to discount what they see with their eyes, while the play asks them to give it their full (if temporary) attention. Where the minister's sermon brings the Heaven of scripture to life, mourning rituals act out the un-reality of death, denying its power over the Christian soul. To a careful observer like Dickinson, however, "making belief" in Heaven seems to preclude a fully conscious investment in life on earth. Moreover, it dismisses those who do find value in the mortal world, as illustrated by the inclusive/exclusive "We" of the following poems.

"We dream - it is good we are dreaming -" (Fr584) explores the transcendence of death allowed both in theatrical performance and within the Christian narrative of salvation. The poem begins:

> We dream - it is good we are dreaming -
> It would hurt us - were we awake -
> But since it is playing - kill us,
> And we are playing - shriek -
>
> What harm? Men die - Externally -
> It is a truth - of Blood -
> But we - we are dying in Drama -
> And Drama - is never dead - (1-8)

There is no "hurt" and no "harm" in play-dying because one is only pretending; the actors will rise again. Likewise, within Christian belief the "Drama" of Christ's promised eternity nullifies, as the performance frame does in theater, the *effect* of death. The "Drama" itself re-defines the mortal experience as un-real, just as the performance frame undoes the lasting effects of what happens (or appears to happen) on stage. Religious belief – the "dreaming" of the poem, I would argue – allows the chosen to "play" at death without being subject to it.

Cautious - We jar each other -
And either - open the eyes -
Lest the Phantasm - prove the mistake -
And the livid Surprise

Cool us to Shafts of Granite -
With just an age - and name -
And perhaps a phrase in Egyptian -
It's prudenter - to dream - (9-16)

Even if ultimately a "Phantasm" or "mistake," the speaker resolves, faith is the more pragmatic, or "prudenter," route through life when the alternative, meeting death's "livid Surprise" with open eyes, seems to offer only the grave (11, 16, 12). The distinction between reality and fiction proves just a matter of perspective, Dickinson muses, since life itself appears merely a temporary stage or child's game within the faithful's vision of immortality.

The gravesite as a stage for sentimental mourning is explored in "We do not play on Graves - " (Fr599), which contrasts the creativity of child's play with the repetitions of social performance. Initially the reader believes the speaker is simply discussing the graveyard's material inadequacy as a play space for children: they do not gather there "Because there is'nt Room - " (2). Then, we realize the speaker is suggesting the gravestone makes a poor stage for theatricals: "Besides - it is'nt even - it slants / and People come - " (3-4). The gravestone is an inconvenient stage for make believe because mourners interrupt the children's displays with their own performances of "make belief":

And put a Flower on it -
And hang their faces so -
We're fearing that their Hearts will drop -
And crush our pretty play - (5-8)

Those who claimed the spot first for imaginative play (and are perhaps even the subject of the mourners' displays) are evicted by those who must act out their mourning rituals. The mourners' performance of bereavement is not only unappreciated, but utterly misunderstood by its child

audience, thus threatening to nullify the display and its social value. The gravesite here becomes two different stages – a stage for loved ones of the departed to remember, with reverence and sorrow, and a competing stage for the children to produce their "pretty play," unrelated to memory, sadness, or death. Victor Turner writes that where the ritual frame represents authority and convention, and encourages belief as a shared investment and goal, play's fictional frame stresses individual creativity and freedom ("Performing" 325). If Christian faith is true, the poem suggests, then children's play is more appropriate to the gravesite than the mourners' displays. The competing stages here, and the resulting breakdown in the performance machinery, help to illustrate what Nicholas Ridout terms the "side *affects* of theatre," that which occurs when expression or reception fail in their intended effect (160). The children/players are baffled by their inability to deliver a play and so reluctantly retreat, sacrificing their stage to the actors authorized to use it.

A related situation is explored in a letter from Dickinson to her Norcross cousins in 1875, when mourning for her father's death is still fresh: "The birds that father rescued are trifling in his trees. How flippant are the saved! They were even frolicking at his grave, when Vinnie went there yesterday. Nature must be too young to feel, or many years too old" (L442). The birds' playground is a human graveyard: again, two distinct performances and audiences gather at one stage. Mirroring the conflict between expression and reception that constitutes the dynamic of "We do not play on Graves - ", Dickinson's letter re-casts the drama to show that perhaps the alternative to Christian faith is not faithlessness, but belief in a different story altogether.

Performance's "play" with death – imaginatively overstepping the very real bounds of human mortality and finitude – provides a model for Dickinson's own rhetorical powers. The finite nature of tragedy presented in the theater does not diminish its power or relevance for

Dickinson; in fact, theater's "lesson" of finitude – an ending that can be repeated, played with, reversed (by each play's new start) – is its primary value to human experience. This recalls Schechner's idea of performance, discussed in the Introduction, as made up of "twice-behaved behaviors" or "restored behaviors," where film-like "strips" of living behavior are removed from their original contexts or causal systems and rearranged into new combinations. In artful performance, he writes, restored behavior is marked, framed, or heightened, and can therefore "be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed" (28). This is close to Sharon Cameron's fascinating study of what she terms Dickinson's "death utterances," in which she argues that the lyric's fusion of subjective and objective time, framing the moment of death as something it can transcend, makes dying "categorical rather than conclusive" ("Et" 73). Dickinson's objectification of death and dying as performance, rather than experience, indicates a similar conception of performance as a frame that allows her to more fully consider lived moments and mortal limitations.

Where religious performance provides an authorized vision of reality for edification of the church community, and social performance allows believers to reify faith through repetitive rituals, popular entertainment promises a spectacle to please the masses. Dickinson's perceived failures as audience – her unwillingness to join the Church or to take comfort in the promise of eternal life beyond mortal death – helped her to understand the equally compromised position of the performer within commercial performance.

The Power of the Popular Audience

"The Show is not the show / But they that go –"
Fr1270, lines 1-2

As the commercial model of performance replaced the didactic one in the mid-century, the moral authority of the religious performer was matched or replaced by the popular audience's power as consumer force. Contemporary attitudes toward popular audiences informed Dickinson's understanding of the shifting power dynamic within public performance. Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor" in *The Atlantic Monthly* of April 1862 advises writers not to look down on the popular audience but to strive to please it: "You are writing for the average eye, and must submit to its verdict" (402). It is this "undifferentiated mass," Higginson argues, which will be "the organ of eternal justice and infallibly awards posthumous fame" (404). Samuel Newman's *Practical System of Rhetoric*, Dickinson's textbook at Amherst and Mount Holyoke, similarly argues that writers and orators must exhibit "excellencies of style" determined by the "general standard of taste," defined as "the agreeing voice of such as are susceptible of emotions of beauty" (39). The rhetorician is closer to a chemist than an artist as he is, Newman writes, concerned with determining "the fitness of particular causes for producing certain effects" in audiences and then reliably providing them (31). This fantasy of a direct causal relation between performance and effect, as in the earlier didactic dynamic, assumes that predictability will keep (paying) audiences coming back for more. The burden of reliable and productive repetition, however, shifts from audience to performer in popular entertainment. Antebellum audiences, according to Terry Baxter, were not obligated to participate in public culture, rather, "they were courted by public figures, and the audiences, in turn, sought our celebrities who, they felt, would assure them of a good show" (39). This vision of an audience of consumers necessarily implies that the performer is a "consumable subject" (Baxter). Accordingly, audience in Dickinson's poems on commercial entertainment becomes an empowered, even threatening, mass entity.

Dickinson's attention to the careers of the premiere female "voices" of her day, actress/reader Fanny Kemble and singer Jenny Lind, and her awareness of their performance rates, tour schedules, and audience numbers, suggests she was fascinated by the spectacle of the female public figure. Lind, in particular, provided a potent example of how modern marketing might turn an artist into a celebrity (and an audience into a mob). Dickinson's review of Lind's performance, which she attended in Northampton in July 1851, offers a parody of popular opinion and praise. Satirizing the ubiquitous Romantic notion of music's sublimity, Dickinson describes the scene in mock-heroic style: "[H]ow Jennie came out like a child and sang and sang again – how bouquets fell in showers, and the roof was rent with applause – how it thundered outside and inside with the thunder of God and of men – judge ye which was the loudest; how we all loved Jennie Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing did'nt fancy *that* so well as we did *her*. . . *Herself* and not her music was what we seemed to love –" (L46). More extraordinary than Lind's singing ability, according to Judith Pascoe, was "her creation of a public persona that seemed to satisfy nearly everyone's exalted expectations of her" (6). In playfully dismissing the performer's talent, and taking satisfaction instead from an imagined personal relationship with the celebrity, Dickinson ridicules the audience as a fickle and foolish mass. Further, she suggests that audiences and critics are more interested in performing the role of tasteful consumer than witnessing talent, as she explores in the poem "The Show is not the Show / But they that go" (Fr1270). Demonstrating her keen awareness of trends in performance, Dickinson focuses her "review" on the sight of Lind, rather than the sound of her voice. The devaluation of sound and language within the star-actor system meant, according to Judith Fisher and Stephen Watt, that "the audience came to see, not always to hear" (xviii). Where explicitly didactic performance pressures the audience member to conform to communal standards of

reception and response, the shift toward commercial entertainment pressures the performer to satisfy audience demands for exhibition. Dickinson's awareness of the popular audience's preference for visual spectacle is mirrored in her attention, in these final poems, to the vulnerability of the performer's body in producing non-verbal displays.

Dickinson uses the image of the balloon – fragile and temporary – as a figure for the public performer in several poems. In "You've seen Balloons set - Hav'nt You?" (Fr730), the poet captures and critiques an audience's reaction to a performer's downfall. The poem's balloon is a public figure, a performer referred to initially as one of the "Creatures so renowned" (8) and then a "Gilded Creature" (13). It can be read as a female performer, a ballerina in particular, as it is compared to a "Swan," described with "Liquid Feet," and trailing "Ribbons" (3, 5, 9). The poem begins by drawing a contrast between how the performer thinks of herself and her audience, and how the "Crowd" views her:

> You've seen Balloons set - Hav'nt You?
> So stately they ascend -
> It is as Swans - discarded You,
> For Duties Diamond -
>
> Their Liquid Feet go softly out
> Opon a Sea of Blonde -
> They spurn the Air, as 'twere too mean
> For Creatures so renowned -
>
> Their Ribbons just beyond the eye -
> They struggle - some - for Breath -
> And yet the Crowd applaud, below -
> They would not encore - Death -

The performer's feelings of superiority and self-confidence – perhaps believing too eagerly in the "Creatures so renowned" label – endanger her, as she struggles to satisfy the crowd's expectations. In the final lines above, she is barely surviving, in reality, though the watching crowd does not sense her danger.

The speaker tells us that the beauty of performers' floating belies their pain in the ascent: "They struggle - some - for Breath" as the ignorant or demanding audience cheers them on. The audience continues to applaud, and so the performance continues. The pronoun use is telling, as the speaker engages the individual audience member directly as "You" in the opening stanza until the audience as "Crowd" becomes a mass, and it shifts to "They." The performer, however, changes from plural to singular in the fourth stanza, indicating the power has shifted. The lone performer is torn and drops back to the ground, mortally wounded: "The Gilded Creature strains - and spins - / Trips frantic in a Tree - / Tears open her imperial Veins - / And tumbles in the Sea" (13-16). The audience, still either oblivious or heartless, takes its leave of the scene:

> The Crowd - retire with an Oath -
> The Dust in the Streets - go down -
> And Clerks in Counting Rooms
> Observe - 'Twas only a Balloon' -

The Crowd is now an angry mob who "retire with an Oath," a derogatory replacement for the customary ovation. For the Clerks, those working behind the scenes, the loss of the star balloon is mildly unfortunate, but the money is secure.

The reader is reminded that the balloon was already a replacement – a stand-in, firing the romantic musings of the crowd who sense their own inability to fly. Baxter notes the tendency in mid-century theater culture to see performance functioning as therapy or catharsis for the audience, with "its primary purpose to make people feel better and adjust to the pressures of their lives" (43). The entertainment stage seemed to offer a venue for the individual artist's creative expression and freedom, but it proved to be just as dependent as didactic and social performance on repetition, ritual, and social convention for its profit and productivity. In the poem, the audience fails to notice what actually happened – perhaps even what their misplaced admiration *caused* to happen – to the performer. Had they understood, the speaker postulates, surely they

would not have called for an encore: "They would not encore - Death -." Or, would they? This ambiguity, bordering on irony, suggests that the audience may in fact be "out for blood," or at least not opposed to it if it provides thrilling entertainment.

The balloon image as performer occurs also in "I would not paint - a picture - " (Fr348), in which Dickinson contrasts the creator or source of the show (painter, cornet, poet) with the thing created (painting, song, poem). The speaker begins by contemplating the (imagined) pleasure of an audience imagining the performer's act of production:

> I would not paint - a picture -
> I'd rather be the One
> It's bright impossibility
> To dwell - delicious - on –
> And wonder how the fingers feel
> Whose rare - celestial - stir -
> Evokes so sweet a torment -
> Such sumptuous - Despair - (1-8)

As the poem continues, "the One" of the second line proves to be a multiplicity – a public – rather than a singular, listening subject. There is no line between the production of sound and its reception by the audience; in fact, the audience determines it *as* performance. We can read this either as a statement on the artist's idealized conception of her art, or an expression of anxiety about how the artist or instrument is subsumed by the performance or product it creates. The speaker imagines herself as a Balloon – a character representing the sound produced by the cornet – buoyed up by air, but that air is contained and held down by its metal neck: "Myself endued Balloon / By but a lip of Metal - / The pier to my Pontoon" (14-16). As with the performer in the previous poem, what builds it up – literally, the air that fills it – is also what brings it back down. This is a powerful statement on the performer's vulnerability within the popular performance dynamic.

> Nor would I be a Poet -

It's finer - Own the Ear -
Enamored - impotent - content
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts - of Melody! (17-24)

What seems initially a rejection of the role of poet for a position in the audience – "it's finer - Own the Ear - " – is complicated when we consider what "Own" means here (18). Does it indicate to whom the Ear belongs – my ear on my body – or the act of controlling it? She describes the listening Ear as "Enamored - impotent - content" and explains the "awful privilege" of its "License to revere" (19, 21, 20). The Ear is the determiner of success or failure in performance, the public authority; it is the Crowd of the previous poem. The performance, no less than the performer herself, is a creation of the audience, the "content" (noun) of the balloon. The power shift within the performance dynamic is now complete, with the public Ear determining not only the success or failure of the show, but its very existence.

Within mid-century culture, as Dickinson illustrates, performer and audience are equally vulnerable to the others' expectations of and plans for them. Alternately powerless and powerful, each side of the performance dynamic takes its turn acting on the authority of a public power that defines, as it subsumes, the "private" individual. Each exerts its *influence* – that mysterious and unavoidable concept – on the other and is changed, itself, in the process. American public life is not like theater, Dickinson argues; it *is* theater.

Conclusion: The Poet-Performer

In a letter to the Norcross cousins, dated January 1859, Dickinson jokes that the attentive audience member might learn the performer's art and take his or her place in the spotlight. She recalls a visit from the cousins: "[Y]ou and I in the dining-room decided to be distinguished. It's

a great thing to be 'great,' Lou, and you and I might tug for a life, and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and we can all listen. What if we learn, ourselves, someday! Who indeed knows?" (L199). The line between one's determination to perform (deciding "to be distinguished") and its objective accomplishment (being considered "great") appears to blur when Dickinson recounts the lived scene as story, realizing the performative power of even her own writing. One final performance poem, "I cannot dance opon my Toes - " (Fr381), seems a companion piece to this letter and its musings on Dickinson herself as a performer.[17]

Many critics believe the poet employs dance and song references in this poem as a clever way to show us what she *can do* in words, but it can also be read as a broader critique of the performance culture surrounding her. The poem demonstrates Dickinson's detailed knowledge of contemporary performance practice, referring directly to a show's marketing, training, costuming, and staging. However, it refers to all of these conventions only to ultimately reject them. The poem begins:

> I cannot dance opon my Toes -
> No Man instructed me -
> But oftentimes, among my mind,
> A Glee possesseth me,
>
> That had I Ballet Knowledge -
> Would put itself abroad
> In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe -
> Or lay a Prima, mad, (1-8)

She then describes the professional dancers in a less-than-flattering way – "hopp[ing] for Audiences - like Birds - / One Claw opon the air" – and rejects their costuming, "no Gown of Gauze," their props, "Nor rolled on wheels of snow," and their styling, "No Ringlet, to my Hair" (11-12, 9, 14, 10). Because such physicality burdens both audience and performer with the

danger of exposure, the speaker replaces it with her own transcendent imagination. The speaker's physical presence is negated, as she claims that "Ballet Knowledge" and not her body, "Would put itself abroad / In Pirouette" (5, 6-7). Knowledge here acts as a type of (rhetorically) embodied rhetoric – the Knowledge of dance dances, while the performer's body seems not only invulnerable, but strangely uninvolved. Still, the speaker/performer imagines receiving the ultimate reward, an ovation: "Till I was out of sight, in sound, / The House encore me so" – and determines "It's full as Opera -" (15-16, 20).

Whether the "full[ness]" refers to the House as a great audience or the feeling she gets from performing, or the "House" refers to her private home or a public venue, the salient point is that Dickinson imagines a private performance in terms of a public one; she uses the vocabulary and conventions of public performance in a private display which negates their importance or necessity. The performance is now *on* her terms because it is *in* her terms – she claims the authority to determine the "sense" of the words. A similar inversion of embodiment, a privatizing of performance, is figured in "The Martyr Poets - did not tell - / But wrought their Pang in syllable -" (Fr665), where the word as voiced and heard is avoided for the relative "Peace" of textual and visual representation. Ultimately, Dickinson realized that while physical embodiment allows an artist's vision to be more vividly imagined and potentially shared, it does not make the vision itself any more (or less) true. As the minister built up the heaven in sermon and the circus put up the tent for its show (Fr257), here the poet-performer creates her own space for belief: "The House encore me so." James McIntosh, speaking of a different poem, argues that Dickinson "constructs her house knowingly as a fiction, an invented fabric of words, not things, a house not made with hands but one that calls attention to its own tenuousness . . . Open to the fairest visitors and to the infinite, it is paradoxically tightly enclosed and sealed from the outside

world" (20).[18] It is safe, after all, precisely because it accepts and revels in its own fictionality, rather than struggling against it. It maintains, even heightens, its artfulness as it does away with the compromising conditions of sociality. Dickinson's own rhetorical power now posits her as performer, audience, and critic, all within one spectacular performance. In this final performance poem, we see what might be termed Dickinson's ideal performance dynamic – the possibility of performance without the threat of exposure, whether the performer's or the audience's. Purely rhetorical, as all figures and movements are verbal fictions positioned "as if," *this* is performance without risk.

Dickinson's seclusion after 1870 did not end her engagement with performance culture. Her later years are perhaps best understood not as an avoidance of the public sphere but only a refusal to perform for it. She continued to watch, listen, read, and explore it, but refused to expose herself to its unmediated inspection and judgment of her. Her existence as "recluse" and "myth" enabled her to have a public presence without actually being present in public. Dickinson delighted in having visitors play piano and sing for her as she listened from upstairs. Judy Jo Small argues, "She had an auditory relationship to a town and its people that she had closed out of her sight" (222). Modifying Small's metaphor a bit, perhaps it is more correct to say that she continued to see and hear it, but refused to let it see or hear her. Refusing to enact her own parlor as performance space, Dickinson could enjoy the music as overhead rather than produced explicitly for her listening pleasure: "[T]he orchard is full of birds, and we can all listen." Complicating the conventional performance dynamic (as she did rhetorically in Fr381), and thus rejecting what Karen Halttunen calls the "genteel performance" of middle-class parlor conduct, Dickinson maintains her "House" by controlling its use and meanings (93). Mabel Loomis Todd, who often played for her friend in later years, recalled how she enjoyed giving her "solitary

recitals" for Dickinson as "invisible auditor." Instead of the customary applause, Todd's efforts were rewarded with "a glass of wine [sent] on a silver salver, and with it either a piece of cake or a rose, and a poem, usually written on the spot" (422-3). Avoiding the conventional display of audience approval, Dickinson offered a creative performance of her own.

CHAPTER TWO

"White Satin, Gas Lights, Applause, and all":[1] Female Celebrity and Feminine Subjectivity in the Poetry of Fanny Kemble and Adah Menken

In stark contrast to a poet like Emily Dickinson, who contemplated theater culture from a safe distance, Fanny Kemble and Adah Menken came to know themselves within it, and therefore had to write through its assumptions and biases in order to assert socially respectable and artistically legitimate identities. Dinah Maria Mulock's *Woman's Thoughts about Women* (1858) addresses the unique difficulties facing the woman artist in the mid-century. Of the few professions open to women, the performer presents a special case: "[S]he needs to be constantly before the public, not only mentally but physically: the general eye becomes familiar, not merely with her genius, but with her corporeality; and every comment of admiration or blame awarded to her, is necessarily an immediate personal criticism" (261). Acknowledging how published writings (no less than public spaces) can function as a type of theater, both Kemble and Menken take on the role of poet, first as a counterpoint to and then as an extension of the role of actress. Only by first seeming to share the public's fears about performing women can the actress-poet ultimately argue against them. As Carol Mattingly argues, "careful negotiation between broken regulations and concessions to expectations" marked the most successful public women (6). Kemble and Menken counter the abstraction of public celebrity with the specificity of a singular interiority "overheard" through poetic form, revealing the intersections of social performance, theatrical practice, and gender identity in mid-century culture. This chapter argues that the experiences of female celebrities in negotiating codes for gendered appearance and behavior can help us to better understand the daily performances of "ordinary" (but no less public) women in mid-century American culture.

While biographers tend to position them as opposites – the cerebral, reluctant performer and the passionate, fearless one – Kemble's and Menken's poems on performance show both working diligently to produce a "personal" subjectivity within popular celebrity. Until the 1840s, Bruce McConachie writes, the social construction and patriarchal assumptions of stardom denied most women the same status and appeal as men in the American theater. This began to change with Kemble, who "created sensations" and gained "worshipful admiration" from influential public figures, contributing to the public respectability of actresses (150). For the highly public woman in the American mid-century, the task of displaying a conventional domestic identity was essential to maintaining social respectability and, by extension, an audience. With a unique understanding of performance as a vehicle for identity formation, and the body as an instrument of subjectivity, Kemble and Menken undertook the "business" of fashioning and projecting a socially-acceptable self through poetry. Just as they did on the theatrical stage, when crafting poetic performances each had to consider the expectations and assumptions of audiences. Each also needed to locate her "character" within a broader narrative or context, which provided a specific set of behaviors, images, and motivations from which to draw. The material conditions of her celebrity, and the assumed values of that audience, determined the specific shape each woman's displays of interiority would take. Both integrated aspects of theater into their poetry, with Menken utilizing the speech patterns and settings of melodrama and reform oratory, and Kemble those of dramatic dialogue and monologue.

Fanny Kemble, heir to England's Siddons/Kemble acting dynasty, is best remembered as the mid-nineteenth-century's pre-eminent dramatic reader of Shakespeare. Born and raised in London, and educated in Paris, Kemble took to the stage as actress at the age of sixteen to save her father's investment in the struggling Covent Garden Theatre (now the Royal Opera House).

After a highly successful tour in America, she married Georgia plantation owner Pierce Butler in 1834 and had two daughters, thereafter dividing her time between England and America until her death in 1893. Her career as an actress lasted from 1829 until her marriage and, after divorcing, she returned to the stage as a dramatic reader from 1847 until 1868. In addition to her confirmed membership among the theatrical and musical elite (sister Adelaide was an opera singer), Kemble enjoyed intimate friendships with major literary figures including Catharine Sedgwick, Henry James, William Thackeray, and Robert Browning. During her lifetime, Kemble published poems and sketches in British and American periodicals, two original plays, translations of Dumas and Schiller, notes on acting and Shakespeare, and collections of poetry, but she is best known today for her prose memoirs, including those on her early experiences in America. Kemble's support of causes including abolition and women's rights was personally strong, but often muted in her public expressions, particularly as she struggled to maintain and improve visitation with her daughters during separation and following divorce from Butler.[2]

Kemble's self-conscious treatment of female celebrity in poems reflects her simultaneously unconventional and culturally conservative upbringing, as well as a desire to maintain respectability in the eyes of middle- and upper-class American theater audiences, which increasingly included women. Performatively distancing herself from audiences, the press, and even theater's aspirations to artistic legitimacy, Kemble presents herself as an unwilling but obligated participant in public culture. Kemble's demeanor as Shakespeare reader helped to calm public fears about the female performer, and suggested transparency and consistency between her stage and poetic personas. In Catherine Burroughs's words, she offered a "carefully modulated performance of femininity," modelled on her favorite Shakespeare heroine, Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* ("Be" 135). As poet, Kemble fosters an identity as dutiful daughter

and sacrificial lamb – to family tradition and financial need, to Shakespeare's canon, and to conservative British culture – cultivating a class- and gender-appropriate private self for public (readerly) consumption.[3]

The details of Adah Menken's early life and parentage are as mysterious and contested as Kemble's are widely-known and well-documented. She was likely born Adelaide McCord in New Orleans around 1835, according to biographer Renee Sentilles. Some scholars believe that she was African-American, born to a mixed race father and French Creole mother in 1839. Others argue that she was Jewish from birth and/or born in Memphis (Eiselein 15). Sentilles holds that Menken was white, not born Jewish, and never even converted to Judaism, though she did assume a Jewish identity after marrying Alexander Isaac Menken in 1856. Menken began her career on the stage as a ballet dancer in her early teens and became a professional actress around 1856, working initially in the South and Midwest. She moved to New York City in 1859 and, for the next two years, enjoyed her most prolific period of writing while building a reputation as a daring stage performer. Menken's celebrity skyrocketed in 1861 following her starring role in *Mazeppa*, for which she was costumed as nude (and male) and tied to a live horse on stage. Breeches roles, utilizing crossdressed actresses to play male characters, were common in the nineteenth century; the majority of American actresses who experienced substantial stage careers played at least one such role at some point in their careers (Mullenix *Wearing* 2). After a highly successful period in California and Nevada, where she became the highest paid actress in America, Menken moved to London in 1864. In Europe, she was an international celebrity with ties to the Parisian and London literati, including rumored affairs with Alexander Dumas, Charles Swinburne, and George Sand. She continued acting until her unexpected death in Paris in 1868. Menken's notoriety was not limited to the stage, but extended to her lifestyle; she was

known for her many marriages (five or six) and as "a notorious Bohemian and a public female smoker" (Marra 21).[4] Refusing to clarify public opinion on her race, sexual orientation, or parentage, Menken seemingly employed scandal as a vehicle to greater fame. She published poems, essays, and sketches in several American periodicals during her lifetime and a collection of poetry, *Infelicia*, was published two weeks after her death.[5]

In keeping with her stage career on the borders of legitimate theater, Menken's poetic persona more clearly reflects the desires of working class audiences in the popular theaters where she performed. Rather than isolating herself from the public, like Kemble, Menken's poetry presents her struggling to be understood and absolved by them. Menken admits to public ambitions in her poetry but repeatedly couches them in sentimental, romantic narratives. She privatizes her public aspirations and conflicts by fashioning a writerly self that is framed in the more acceptable terms of intimacy and domesticity – representing herself variously as disappointed daughter, wronged wife, and forsaken mother. In stark contrast to Kemble's reserve, Menken's more overtly expressive and ambiguous stage presentation threatened to prove public fears about performing women justified. Her highly physical stage roles, suggesting uncontrolled passions, provided an image she would simultaneously justify and regret in poetry.

The spectacle of a woman on stage – whether Shakespeare reader or breeches performer – brought contemporary conflicts over gender, culture, and public space into high relief for nineteenth-century audiences. The gendering of public and private spaces, rhetorics, and roles was closely tied to concerns about cultural demarcations in a time of great change. The ability of acting women to move among, or even beyond, these strict categories made them a special threat to the existing social order. As actresses, Kemble and Menken faced more public scrutiny than performers like Swedish singer Jenny Lind or Austrian ballerina Fanny Elssler, who also enjoyed

highly successful American tours in the mid-century. By foregrounding the act of dissembling, Lesley Ferris argues, actresses suggest that all women are potentially secret dissemblers (x). The actress willingly (and perhaps willfully) portrays words and characters that are not truly her own, and often are in direct contradiction to roles and behaviors authorized for women. The problem posed by the female who acts, as elucidated by Faye Dudden, is that she can evade the cultural scripts that tell her how to "act female" (2). This very liminality afforded Kemble and Menken the opportunity to test the boundaries of acceptable gendered expression in performances, both staged and written.

The self-presentation each offered on stage at the height of her career helps to further distinguish between Kemble and Menken and their distinct audiences. On stage, Kemble performed the role of reader, delivering Shakespeare's words while seated behind a desk, complete with lamp and tablecloth. While theatrical convention dictated that spectators pretend that actors were the characters they portrayed, Allison Byerly notes, "the conventions of the reading performance worked to distance the reader from the various roles he or she would perform" (134). Kemble's dresses at readings were not stage costumes but "simply-designed dresses in appropriate colors and textures for the general tone of each play, black or red for the tragedies, dark blue for the histories, and pastels for the comedies and romances" (Thompson 638). To start her readings, Kemble "invariably mounted to the platform carrying her Shakespeare book; curtsied in recognition of the audience; seated herself at a table with a covering to the floor; said, 'I have the honor to read . . . ' (naming the particular play); slowly read the cast of characters; and then plunged into the reading" (Thompson 638-9). Her role as reader instructs the audience how the performance is to be received, leaving no doubt about her privileging of the text above all other considerations. This formality appealed to a highly

cultured and self-conscious audience, which appreciated the verbal focus of her performance. A review from 1859 titled "Mrs. Kemble's Readings – The Elocutionist of the Age" reads, "While listening to her we feel as if the intrusion of the usual accompaniments of the stage – such as costume, exits and entrances, scenery and decorations – would be only impertinence." Praising Kemble's skill in "vocal personation" and "declamation," the reviewer seems relieved to sit back and listen, confident that his own status remains unchallenged by any questionable displays on stage. Byerly notes that Victorian antitheatricalism found an outlet in "reading performances, which represented a domestication of theater" (125). Avoiding the "impertinence" of theatricality, Kemble appears as mother, reading to well-behaved children in her well-appointed parlor.

In contrast to Kemble's language-focused didacticism on stage, Menken offered a visual spectacle of gender ambiguity. *Mazeppa* had been a popular equestrian drama for thirty years before Menken's debut in the role in 1861. She added a new dimension, however, by performing a part of the plot – when soldiers strip the prince, tie him naked to a wild stallion, and send him into the Siberian Steppes to die – only recounted in other stagings. "Menken was not nude," Sentilles explains, "she wore pink tights and a tunic, but it was as close to a nude female body as one had ever seen in a respectable theater" ("Identity" 130). Her audience could not forget she was a woman, so the specter of her actual gendered body enhanced their titillation at being deceived by her ambiguously performing one; as Daphne Brooks argues, "spectacle resided in the (in)authenticity of Menken's disrobed figure on the stage" (167-8). Through this confusing, contradictory mix of theatricality and authenticity, Randall Knoper argues, she "made the possible meanings of Menken proliferate. Her acting could look like emotion bared as well as like theatrical posturing" (53). As a show based on Byron's 1819 poem, Gustavus Stadler notes,

Mazeppa became burlesque in Menken's hands: "Using Byron's character as an occasion for a leg show, she . . . situated her act between high culture and music-hall titillation" (49). The difficulties involved in definitively interpreting and categorizing the performance, or its performer, mirrored the public's broader concerns about gender and class within American society. Rather than Kemble's careful mirroring of her elite audience's vanity, Menken, in Sentilles words, "fostered loyalty by constantly 'revealing' herself in highly orchestrated performances of intimacy" ("Identity" 129). Her own staged ambiguity, moreover, encouraged a broader and more diverse audience, one which delighted in the visual spectacles of modern theater. Sentilles writes of Menken: "While it is rare to garner tangible power from dwelling in the social margins of real life, claiming to be from those margins within the created world of celebrity apparently adds exoticism and cachet that can, if nothing else, bring power through attracting a larger audience" ("Identity" 144). It also provided a position from which her poetic persona might claim victimization and invite sympathy.

In the actress-poet's hands, the writing desk becomes a stage for performing privacy, affirming social respectability, and asserting artistic legitimacy. Engaging with contemporary cultural discourses on celebrity, genius, and the female body, Kemble and Menken write through (and often against) their performance personas in order to assert more conventional feminine identities in poetry. Both counter the overt theatricality of the stage with the assumed privacy and transparency of the poet's page; however, each employs different vocabularies and rhetorical modes to satisfy their distinct audiences. These differences reflect important changes in theater practice and the demarcation of high and popular cultures in the American mid-century, as outlined in the Introduction. Moreover, Kemble and Menken reveal the dialogic (and even mutually constitutive) relation of seemingly opposed elements within mid-century life and

culture: public and private, celebrity and genius, audience and performer. Against essentialist views of gender, class, and culture, the actress-poet (herself a hybrid) argues that identity is not fixed, but performed.

Popular Fame, "The Public," and Self-Promotion

> *"I have no desire to sell my soul for anything, least of all for sham fame, mere notoriety."*
> *Kemble to Harriet St. Leger, letter of 9 March 1830 (*Journals *28)*

As stage performers, Kemble and Menken had very different relations to the press, skill with self-promotion, and levels of comfort with the popular audience, contributing to the varied representations of celebrity in their poetry. According to Heather McPherson, "it was the explosive, democratizing power of the media – the rapid diffusion of news, books, pamphlets, portraits and caricatures – that gave rise to the modern 'international fame culture' or celebrity, in which the public came to play a central role in recognizing and validating fame" (121). Each responds to popular fame as a poet, in fact, utilizing the very biases leveled against her as actress. The engaged but regretful performance persona of Menken's poems reflects her often harsh treatment in the popular press, while Kemble's detached voice echoes her more dignified treatment. Both, however, employ the rhetoric and images of domesticity and intimacy in contrast to the public performance environment, its threats, and the public woman's victimization. The damages done by female publicity are figured distinctly as domestic, maternal, and familial in their poetry, in order to affirm the actress-poet's "true" identity as private woman. Considered together, Kemble's and Menken's media coverage, self-promotion, and poetry reveal how the female celebrity and her audience were mutually and simultaneously constituted, in large part through the shared scripts of domestic ideology and class self-consciousness.

Repeatedly referring to Fanny as "the last of the Kembles," the mid-century American press, with its self-conscious regard for European cultural traditions and figures, helped to shield Kemble from the "bad press" frequently directed at Menken. American critical responses to Kemble often betrayed a sense of competition with her home country of England as the standard bearer of "high culture." Washington D.C.'s *Daily National Intelligencer* of 18 January 1833, anticipating her debut in the city, encouraged readers to "rally round Miss Fanny Kemble on this occasion, and evince to her that the citizens of, and distinguished sojourners in, the Seat of the Government of the Union, will not be behind hand in paying a proper tribute to her transcendent merits" ("Communication"). For American audiences in the 1840s, according to Bruce McConachie, English stars reinforced the cultural system of gentility: "To the eyes of their adoring fans, stars were the new aristocrats, setting standards of behavior that status-conscious Americans hoped to emulate" ("American" 150). Confirming this assessment, an article in the New York *Weekly Herald* from 1849 notes the "distinguished, fashionable and most crowded audience" attending one of Kemble's readings at the Stuyvesant Institute ("Fanny…Reading"). Another article in the *Herald* from the same year (referring to Kemble's "genius" twice in the first paragraph) claims that antitheatrical prejudice need not apply to Kemble's performances: "A considerable portion of our citizens, of great intelligence and refinement, who, from fixed religious principles are averse to frequenting theatres, will attend these readings, as they will be accompanied by none of those objectionable features, either as regards the place, the audience, or the performance, which constitute their chief argument against theatres" ("Fanny…Readings"). Kemble is less an entertainer than a cultural ambassador, and her audiences are not "fans" but discriminating admirers.

Kemble was not particularly concerned with her representation in the press, according to Dudden: "Envisioning a publicity that was benign, even 'safe,' she counted the abuses of publicity as akin to the errors of license that could accompany liberty" (55). If one has nothing to hide, Kemble believed, there is nothing to fear from the papers. Kemble's friend Henry James recalled, "I never saw a newspaper in her house, nor in the course of many years heard her so much as allude to one . . ." (106). Kemble's own contributions to the periodical press (typically limited to the occasional poem) were decidedly proper and restrained. In the 1870s, when she no longer performed regularly on the stage, Kemble wrote a series of personal reflections for *The Atlantic Monthly* titled "Old Woman's Gossip." Couching her confessions as concessions to a greedy public, she claims her life-stories are not particularly valuable, but offers them only because, in her words, "the public appetite for gossip appears to be insatiable" (152). Such performances of modesty were essential to the public woman, Shira Wolosky argues, as they provided the basis for her right to speak at all (*Poetry* 13). Kemble's reticence as a public figure was celebrated by contemporary journalists as just another example of her high breeding and feminine self-restraint. James approvingly said of Kemble, "if she had not hated invasion and worldly noise we should not have measured her disinterestedness and her noble indifference" (83). The performing woman who considers herself superior to her adoring public is the only kind worthy of respect, he suggests.

Without the need to defend herself against widespread criticism, Kemble's poetry instead details the female performer's determination to resist the appeal of public adoration. Repeatedly, as in "To Miss—" (1844), Kemble compares the "warm hearth" and "happy home" of childhood to "life's weary onward way" as an actress (17, 13, 16). The poem "Lines, In answer to a question" (1844) more explicitly contrasts the performance environment – "the pageant wild" –

with the "blessed home" of true love and personal memory (8, 12). The speaker claims to remain untouched by the theatrical world's "strange life, so full of sin and folly" by finding safety "in the inmost chambers of my soul" through poetry (4, 11). By investing in "that secret world" and rejecting the false "dream" of fame, she remains free of its taint (22):

> . . . Therefore, this evil life,
> With all its gilded snares, and fair deceivings,
> Its wealth, its want, its pleasures, and its grievings,
> Nor frights, nor frets me, by its idle strife (33-36)

Through a determined indifference, Kemble's speaker links "the living springs of poesy" with the memory of "the voices that I love to hear" and "the glances that I love to see," while contrasting them with the false sounds and sights of celebrity (18, 19, 20). In "Song" (1883), the speaker similarly claims that worldly applause and riches mean nothing to her when compared to a loved one's personal regard: "No – not to win the world's applause / . . . / But to find favour in your eyes / And win one smile from you" (1, 3-4). By publishing poetic confessions consistent with the antitheatrical bias of elite audiences, as well as gender demands that a woman's true focus be a man, Kemble serves her public image by asserting the public's insignificance.

Kemble not only projects back to her own lost youth and innocence to suggest her current isolation, but to drama's storied past. In a journal entry written in Philadelphia, dated 5 December 1832, Kemble mentions that an admirer has given her a music box, "a curious piece of machinery," as a gift. She describes the object:

> It contained a little bird, no larger than a large fly, with golden and purple wings, and a tiny white beak. On the box being wound up, this little creature flew out, and perching itself on the brink of a gold basin, began fluttering its wings, opening its beak, and uttering sundry very melodious warbling, in the midst of which, it sank suddenly down, and disappeared, the lid closed, and there was an end. What a pity 't is that we can only realize fairy-land through the means of machinery. One reason why there is no such thing left as the believing faculty among men, is because they have themselves learned to make magic, and perform miracles . . . . (*American* 65)

The concern she expresses about how performance produces belief clearly reflects doubts about her own craft's ability to move the modern audience. Clinging to the traditions and conventions of drama's past (literary) glory, she posits herself as a reluctant participant in modern, commercialized theater. Before 1850, Dudden observes, Americans conceived of acting as an *aural* art, and only the term *audience* endures to remind us of that earlier focus on voice and language over visual spectacle in theater (15, 62). By mid-century, according to Judith Fisher and Stephen Watts, in many productions of even the most elevated drama, "attentiveness to language was superseded by attention to scenic detail" (xviii). Ann Blainey notes a similar development in opera as the century advanced: "opera was becoming less like a concert and more like an integrated drama" (125). As visual theatrics and orchestral scores assumed a more dramatic role in productions, the performer had to fight to be heard. Once a disembodied voice transmitting timeless drama, the performer now risked becoming part of the modern machinery of entertainment.

In the poem "On a Musical Box" (1844), Kemble's speaker identifies with the figure of the bird in the machine, sharing its burdens and sorrows as a fellow performer. Kemble repeatedly uses the image of the prisoner's cell to represent the theatrical stage, highlighting the reluctant performer's physical containment, isolation, and distress. Blake Allmendinger argues that Kemble equated acting with slavery because in both, "freedom of voluntary movement [is] replaced by limitations of imitative action" (507). Though he does not address Kemble's poetry, this poem comes closest to his reading of her vision of performance as forced labor. The poem opens:

> Poor little sprite! In that dark, narrow cell
> Caged by the law of man's resistless might!
> With thy sweet, liquid notes, by some strong spell,

Compelled to minister to his delight! (1-4)

Instead of placing its audience under a spell of belief, the bird is entranced in order to produce a performance *for* them. The bird's beautiful, innocent artistry is contaminated by man's need to control and display it for his own entertainment and diversion. Kemble's speaker then wonders about the bird's origins, where it might have lived before it was forced into the box:

> Say, dost thou think, sometimes when thou art singing,
> Of thy wild haunt upon the mountain's brow,
> Where thou were wont to list the heath-bells ringing,
> and sail upon the sunset's amber glow? (9-12)

The speaker fondly remembers a time when she listened, instead of being listened to, and admits that her mind is elsewhere during performance, imagining former playmates still at play in their old haunts, without her: "Whilst thou, in darkness, sing'st thy life away" (18).

The speaker imagines the bird might pray – if it could voice anything genuine, anything other than the required material, "thy oft-told theme" (13) – to return home, perhaps even believing it might be rewarded for its song with an answer to this prayer: "Perchance thou sing'st in hopes thou shalt be free, / Sweetly and patiently thy task fulfilling" (27-28). The speaker then interrupts this pleasing picture, abruptly announcing such a hope is foolish and that even if the bird *could* return home, it would already be forgotten: unknown to them now, it would be "a shunned and forsaken thing" (33). She does not dispute the suggestion of her contamination, but accepts it as a truth, determined only to avoid corrupting others. In this, the speaker intimates that her own performance success has isolated her from the friends and family whose expressions of love mean more to her than the abstract audience's applause. She tells the bird to "rest content with sorrow," knowing at least that it is not alone in this predicament (39). Its only escape (like the speaker's own) will be death, when body and instrument fail, releasing them from the burden of performance. Projecting all of her regrets and resentments onto the bird in the machine, rather

than admitting them as her own, Kemble's speaker makes her pain even more poignant for the sympathetic reader.

Apparently undeserving of Kemble's more dignified treatment by the American press, Menken's critics repeatedly mention her frequent "nudity" and successive marriages. The *Daily Cleveland Herald* of 9 October 1862 featured a one-line article poking fun at Menken's successive spouses: "Mrs. Adah Isaacs Menken Heenan Newell 'C. Kerr,' came in from the East yesterday and went on to Columbia." The *Salt Lake Daily Telegraph* of 17 June 1866 included a notice that Menken planned to tour Central Park on her horse, "but will, we presume, wear some clothes on the occasion" ("We are").[6] Unlike Kemble, who was burdened with protecting her family's social standing, Menken took greater liberties with publicity and did not ignore bad press, but engaged it directly. Following the biggest scandal of her life (when boxer John Heenan refused to acknowledge his marriage to a visibly pregnant Menken), Menken defended herself through the papers and in a prose piece titled "Self Defence [sic]." Speaking mainly in general and abstract terms about "woman's rights," her most direct reference to Heenan has melodramatic flair: "The dagger that was sheathed in my unsuspecting heart, by hands that I most trusted, I have wept over in secret and silence, striving to bury my sorrow and desolation in my own soul from the eyes of the prying world; shrinking from exposing one whom I have loved, how dearly wives and mothers alone can tell. But I am hunted to the river brink, and must speak or perish" (183). She links her privacy here with her roles as wife and mother, placing issues of sexuality safely within domestic bounds. This likewise justifies her "speaking out" as a defense against unwarranted intrusions on this very privacy.

Offering the pose of the helpless and unfriended woman and a figurative allusion to sexual violence, Menken implores readers to come to her rescue by thinking better of her. As she

does in her poetry, here she claims she must speak her truth and, equally important, be heard and thereby absolved by the public. Such appeals to the reader demonstrate how, as Glenn Hendler explains, sympathy in the nineteenth century was not a privatizing emotional exchange but "a paradigmatically public sentiment" (12). Saidiya Hartman, too, notes how the "seduction of the reader" strategy, commonly employed in slave narratives, appeals "to the reader for sympathy and understanding, while actually deposing the reader as judge" (107). Menken's work repeatedly draws on images of slavery, aligning her own victimization with biblical (Jewish) and national (African-American) narratives of enslavement and redemption.

Beyond merely defensive moves, Menken utilized the press for free advertising. Menken skillfully used even critical reviews to her advantage, as evidenced in her response to a London review that suggested her performance should be banned as exhibitionism; she published a playful response to ensure "the excitement was kept up through the press" (Menken 225). Similarly, in a letter to press agent Ed James from around March 1863, Menken explains that controversy over her professed sympathy for the South (and her subsequent arrest as an alleged Secessionist aiding the C.S.A.) contributed to increased ticket sales in Northern theaters. She writes, "Although, for the sake of my business, the matter was kept out of the papers, it had done me a great deal of good, and helped me to knock [competing acts] 'higher than a kite.' I am now playing to crowded houses" (234). A near-disaster involving a live horse on stage during rehearsals for *Mazeppa* also helped to boost ticket sales, as James explains: "The announcement of the daring undertaking, and news of the accident, secured a packed house the first and every succeeding night, while the opposition was left almost in the cold" (222). James describes Menken's "first really brilliant or sensational move" as billing herself as Mrs. John C. Heenan for performances concurrent with Heenan and Tom Sayers' international prize fight: "Heenan

felt annoyed, but could not prevent her using his name" (223). Menken had a keen understanding of the channels for publicity and how to manipulate them and, at times, seemed to enjoy the business of fame as much as, or even more than, her actual work on the stage.

Menken's self-promotion in *The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, in particular, worked to heighten the larger-than-life stage persona she performatively rejected through her poetry. These puff pieces, likely written by Menken or her publicist, focus on material aspects of her person – wardrobe, jewelry, retinue – suggesting that her public persona is distinct from the True Woman of her poetry. An article from 2 May 1866, citing "a New York letter," reports, "The Mazeppa Menken has arrived here. She brought her flying steed, Haidee-ul-Azeen, her diamonds, her funds, her *femme de chambre*, and all her costly wardrobe with her." It goes on to detail her "luxurious apartments, furnished in the most magnificent splendor, servants by the dozen." Finally, en route to the theater, "Adah goes resplendent in jewelry and court dresses, jeweled fans and immaculate kids – her hair, neck, and bosom powdered with the dust of real diamonds . . ." ("The Menken"). The very images and objects highlighted in such press pieces – jewelry, diamonds, gold – are used also in poems but, while deployed here to indicate the celebrity's glamour and success, appear in the poems as empty trappings of fame.

The proud, confident public persona of Menken's press pieces is rejected, regretted, and revealed as false in her poems. Seen from the "inside," her poetry argues, fame, fortune, and public regard fail to satisfy the private woman. Menken's poem "Myself" (titled "Now and Then" before its inclusion in *Infelicia*) begins, "Away down into the shadowy depths of the Real I once / lived. / I thought that to seem was to be" (1-3). Drawing a contrast between "seeming" and "being," the speaker claims that while she foolishly believed in the "Real"-ity of public life before, she now knows better. This suggests that the performer shares the audience's confusion

in distinguishing between the fiction on stage and the reality of life. Sentilles observes this confusion as a recurring pose in Menken's poetry, with the speaker exploring "the idea of 'seeming' and 'being' and reflect[ing] on her confusion, disillusionment, and pain at being unable to pull the two apart" (*Performing* 138). The speaker claims that her soul has been "crush[ed] out" by the "smiling sneer" and "business of the world" (12, 8, 9). First deceived by others, she becomes a dissembler herself:

> Now I gloss my pale face with laughter, and sail my voice on with the tide.
> Decked in jewels and lace, I laugh beneath the gaslight's glare, and quaff the purple wine. (14-17)

She is driven to theatrics, in a sense, because it is the currency of modern society. Her public life is an act, and she costumes her body carefully for it:

> Still I trim my white bosom with crimson roses; for none shall see the thorns.
> I bind my aching brow with a jeweled crown, that none shall see the iron one beneath.
> My silver-sandaled feet keep impatient time to the music, because I cannot be calm. (27-32)

Despite her body's performance, her "minor-keyed soul" remains alone on "one of Heaven's high hills of light," waiting for God's protection and direction (18, 19). The same images appear in "Resurgam," where the speaker contrasts her "dead soul" with the outward appearance of beauty and youth (13-25). While her body performs and pretends, she claims that God hears her "hopeless love" through her false laughter; only he knows the truth (35). Through her poetry, however, she insinuates that readers can share God's privileged perspective.

As an actress, Menken admits "lying" to others, but wonders also if she is lying to herself:

> But if I can cheat my heart with the old comfort, that love can be forgotten, is it not better?

> After all, living it but to play a part!
> The poorest worm would be a jewel-headed snake if she could! (36-40)

She is not wrong to "play a part," she decides, because everyone does. While her public life is a "grandeur of glare and glitter," she privately claims genuine (and appropriately sentimental) feelings of remembrance, jealousy, and regret (41). The "business of living" requires her to lock up true hopes and desires in her heart, "far under the velvet and / roses of the world" (51, 54-5). Her only release from performance will come at death, when the body's falseness dies away and her true nature is revealed (74-75). Sentilles notes that the poem "wears a cloak of sentimentality" in its imagery and autobiographical quality, but strays from it in formal elements and style: "Its tone is strident, even bitter, without the sweetness of sentimental martyrdom. Menken adopted a style that suggested she was marching about a stage, defending herself to a crowd of spectators" (*Performing* 139). The lyric pose and sentimental imagery invite the audience's attendance to her private sorrow, while the oratorical tone aims to inspire their aid in her defense.

While seemingly ignoring the press altogether, Kemble reveals that her motivations for maintaining distance from live audiences are more defensive than dismissive. Fame's burdens are palpable, like a weight she must bear and endure. In a letter to Harriet St. Leger dated 15 July 1831, Kemble explains it is not her own display of body on stage that most troubles her in performance, but the bodily response of audiences: "I do not think it is the acting itself that is so disagreeable to me, but the public personal exhibition, the violence done (as it seems to me) to womanly dignity and decorum in thus becoming the gaze of every eye and the theme of every tongue . . ." (*Journals* 30-1). She becomes objectified as "gaze" and "theme" for others, thus subjected to their interpretations. Exposed to them as body, she must endure the displays of *their*

bodies, which are powerfully reduced to "eye" and "tongue," mirroring her own physical abstraction. In "To—" (1844), the speaker claims that fans' adoration threatens her resolve to resist it and explains how the experience of being watched brings her agony:

> Oh! Turn those eyes away from me!
> Though sweet, yet fearful are their rays;
> And though they beam so tenderly,
> I feel, I tremble 'neath their gaze.
> Oh, turn those eyes away! For though
> To meet their glance I may not dare,
> I know their light is on my brow,
> By the warm blood that mantles there.

Applause too, Kemble claims, inhibits rather than encourages performance. On her return to the stage as a reader, as recorded in a letter to St. Leger of 18 February 1847, Kemble ponders: "How I wondered at myself, as I stood at the side scene the other night, without any quickening of the pulse or beating of the heart . . . When I went on, however, I had to encounter the only thing that I dreaded; and the loud burst of public welcome . . . shocked me from head to foot, and tried my nerves to a degree that affected my performance unfavorably through several scenes" (*Journals* 179). Applause, the audience's conventional expression of praise, inhibits her expression of the performance text because it threatens to break down her defenses against the public. Kemble feared the addiction to fame she witnessed in family members, particularly the post-retirement malaise of her aunt Sarah Siddons. Having watched Siddons struggle to adjust to life out of the public eye, Kemble included in her daily prayers the hope that she "might be defended from the evil influence" of acting (Blainey 51). Consistent with the persona's defensive pose, Kemble claims the impersonal regard she receives from a theatrical audience carries the taint of the stage – it is an *act* of affection, a sham love she must steel herself against.[7]

Kemble's "every eye" and "every tongue" seems to speak, also, to her discomfort with the diverse audiences seeking Shakespeare performances in the mid-nineteenth century.

Lawrence Levine argues that the century "harbored two Shakespeares: the humble, everyday poet who sprang from the people and found his strength and inspiration among them, and the towering genius" of immortal fame (69). Shakespearean drama was simultaneously popular and elite, Levine notes, and Kemble's return to the stage as reader rather than actress marked her as privileging the "sacred Shakespeare" and *his* audience (86, 69). Throughout her journals, Kemble criticizes American audiences for what she terms their vices, vulgarities, and incivilities. After attending a church service in Philadelphia in 1832, she reflects on the poor performance of the congregants: "I suppose their love of freedom will not suffer them to be amenable to forms, or wear the exterior of humbleness and homage, even in the house of the Most High God. The whole appearance of the congregation was that of indifference, indolence, and irreverence, and was highly displeasing to the eye" (*American* 47-8). She offers similar evaluations of theater audiences, noting their inability, particularly when viewing Shakespeare, "to see it understandingly" (*American* 39, 41, 45, 50). She laments that audiences want to be entertained, rather than ennobled. She even records observing a group of amateur ticket brokers from the window of her hotel room in Boston:

> It is quite comical to see the people in the morning at the box-office: our window is opposite to it, and 't is a matter of the greatest amusement to me to watch them. They collect in crowds for upwards of an hour before the doors open, and when the bolts are withdrawn, there is a yelling and shouting as though the town were on fire. In the rush, thumping and pummeling one another, and not one comes out without rubbing his head, or his back, or showing a piteous rent in his clothes. I was surprised to see men of a very low order pressing foremost to obtain boxes, but I find that they sell them again at an enormous increase to others who have not been able to obtain any; and the better to carry on their traffic, these worthies smear their clothes with molasses, and sugar, &c., in order to prevent any person of more decent appearance, or whose clothes are worth a cent, from coming near the box-office: this is ingenious, and deserves a reward . . . . (*American* 93)

Kemble appreciates the careful costuming of these "worthies" for their theatrical labors, but seems disappointed that such "low order" individuals take advantage of their betters.

Maintaining her own theatrical performance as valuable (for the appropriate audience), she equates the public's deceptive displays with their working-class status.

Menken's essay "Behind the Scenes" (1860), while again performatively rejecting the trappings of fame highlighted in her press pieces, more directly implicates the theater audience in crimes against her as a performing woman. Presenting a popular actress who performs brilliantly in spite of her own personal heartache, in this case her mother's death (Menken's own mother had died earlier in the year), the story reveals the fiction of relations on stage and between performer and audience. She begins with the adoring audience's praise: "'Divine creature! Magnificent! Glorious! Isn't she?' So exclaimed a thousand tongues – so felt a thousand hearts – as the star of the night came out, with her princess air and classic beauty, while her light laugh rang its music over the crowded throng, and met its echo in every spell-bound heart" (191). Performer and audience both lose themselves in the fiction of the performance, and in their projections onto the other. If the audience had seen their "petted idol of the comedy" just an hour before, she reflects, they would have found her at her mother's deathbed. How would they have reacted, she wonders, to *that* performance? "Well, the mimic scenes are over, and, like the poor, heartbroken actress, whose glad, eager personations brought down the *house*, I, too, will go *home* to life's realities. Perhaps, alas! many of us had better been there before" (194 emphasis mine). The distinction Menken draws between "house" as theatrical venue and "home" as the domestic, private sphere is important, indicating the first is wholly counterfeit and the second pure truth. In these final lines, our speaker separates herself from the figure of the "heartbroken actress" we saw at her mother's deathbed (suggesting the actress dropping the façade of an assumed character), but admits to her own tragedies. Performatively turning her back on audience/reader to return home, the actor, in Catherine Burroughs's words, "exerts power by frustrating

spectators who want to follow him or her" (*Closet* 50). Menken's piece argues that popular fame keeps women from their domestic and familial duties, ultimately damaging their understanding of themselves and of reality, though it piques readers' interest in the very "private" space it claims to protect.

Menken's assumption of an equal relation to audiences – sharing (at times) their desires for escape, illusion, and fame – positions her to warn them away from making the mistakes she has made as a public woman. In "Infelix" (1868), Menken speaks of "Fame's fever in the brain," an ambition that will not give her rest (23). Fame is imaged as unrealized ambition, a drive that possesses her, though she cannot possess (as in own or claim) *it*. "Aspiration" (1868) too details the dangers and illusions associated with ambition, warning other young artists whose vision "[f]ixes in ecstasy upon a star" (9):

> Poor, impious Soul! that fixes its high hopes
> In the dim distance, on a throne of clouds,
> And from the morning's mist would make the ropes
> To draw it up amid acclaim of crowds –
> Beware! . . . (1-5)

The reference to the self-raised stage curtain suggests that by inviting applause, the performer also invites her own destruction. The physical dangers of ambition and fame are also detailed in "Gold" (1860), in which the speaker dreams of flying upward "on Fame's proud wing" (5) and boldly scaling "Ambition's height" (9). Menken's pursuit of fame as a "fever in the brain" is quite similar to the disturbing, narcotic "effects" of fame that Kemble feared. Both poets represent fame as an *embodied* experience, highlighting the centrality of the female body to celebrity's risks.

Two final poems on celebrity place the performer back into the domestic sphere, warning readers that the corruption of publicity can make a once-happy home into a barren wasteland. In

detailing celebrity's potential damage to domesticity, both Kemble and Menken address the public's most enduring fear about performing women, but they represent themselves as victims rather than pursuers of fame. In an unnamed sonnet that begins "Thou poisonous laurel leaf" (1844), Kemble describes fame as a weed that overtakes adjacent blossoms in the garden. The "plot of earth" that the performer is "doomed to till full sore" is darkened by the "unwelcome shade" of the laurel (5, 2, 5). As she did in "On a Musical Box," Kemble represents fame as a toiling, laborious physical task in order to convey its intense focus on the body of the actress. The speaker seems to tend the garden not for her own sake, but for another's, or even fame's own, benefit. She says to the laurel, "I do not toil / For thee" but the laurel comes anyway, uninvited (3-4). She describes the laurel's unwanted growth as forming a crown: "Why hast thou wreathed thyself around my brows, / Casting from thence the blossoms of my spring, / Breathing on youth's sweet roses till they fade?" (8-10). The burden of fame enacts isolation from personal loves, hopes, and youthful plans. Its own growth overtakes and chokes the life out of the bloom (whether the body of the performer or the beauty of the dramatic text) it once honored and adored; fame takes on a life of its own. She then contrasts her view of fame with the common man's, showing how each wants what it cannot have:

> Alas! thou art an evil weed of woe,
> Watered with tears and watched with sleepless care,
> Seldom doth envy thy green glories spare;
> And yet men covet thee – ah, wherefore do they so! (11-14)

Speaking directly to fame as "evil weed of woe," she claims that envy threatens fame's growth, as fame threatens the performer's. Employing the domestic image of the garden and its careful attendance, Kemble is able to suggest connections to her familial legacy without speaking directly about them. In this way, her writerly assertiveness is not a rejection of the traditional values of womanhood and familial duty, but a defense of them.

In a strikingly similar expression of fame's effects on the female performer, the domestic analogy of Menken's "Sale of Souls" (1868) replaces Kemble's family garden with her own maternal womb. Here, the maternal persona is deployed in an effort to mitigate the negative effects of fame and to inspire sympathy rather than censure for her own childlessness. (Menken gave birth to two sons, but lost both in infancy.) "Sale of Souls" offers the most chilling expression of the consequences for a woman of life on the stage, suggesting that in order to give audiences what they want, she must lose what she (naturally) most desires, motherhood. The lyric speaker opens the poem by asking for mercy and protection from "[a]ngels of the weary-hearted" (2). Representing the chaos of modern theater culture, the poem presents a cacophony of voices, each pleading its case or its wares; try as she might, she cannot find peace or quiet, hearing only the "rough clang / of gold" throughout the crowded city (24-5). In a child-like position herself (pleading for protection, frightened), the speaker recalls her lost child's voice, he "who made music to call me mother" (42). This is a striking image, as the mother's body that produced the child (as the actress's body produces its show) is revisited by the "music" of her lost child's voice. The child, called Eros, is also the source of its own ultimate destruction, as her child "bears" its own child: "The wild cry ["Souls for sale! Souls for sale! / Souls for gold! who'll buy?"] awoke the god of ambition, that slumbered in / the bosom of Eros" (68-9). Ambition had been sleeping in her child's chest, suggesting either that hopeful, youthful talent breeds an ambition that will destroy its bearer in the end, or that the performing woman's body is incompatible with motherhood. Once more collapsing domestic/familial and career concerns, it is difficult to determine where Menken intends child to be read *as child* or as figure for her own youthful talent and hopes (like that in Kemble's garden). The site for both, however, is her woman's body, so the ambiguity may be intentional. Menken here contrasts youthful innocence

and hope with a "fallen" performance self in order to gauge how far popular fame has taken her off course.

Ideally, Menken's poem suggests, maternity binds the woman to the world and gives time meaning, as the child gives the woman's body purpose: "The link of years that wore a golden look bound me to / woman-life by the sweet love of my Eros . . ." (40-1). From the earlier domestic scene where her child's voice, the waves, and the sunshine "spoke" to her, now the speaker is left in a world filled with sounds but empty of meaning or genuine communication. The speaker's soul is "sold to the world" and her child is taken, leaving her alone on a ship sailing by night into storms: the sounds of the storm are ceaseless and the sky's darkness means she hears but cannot see to make sense of them (102-106). Her pursuit of fame costs her both her child and her soul; her body continues to exist, but it lacks purpose, meaning, and direction. The breakdown of sound as meaningful communication into auditory clutter makes a powerful statement on anxieties regarding the female body in performance and its implications for domesticity and civil society; the harm is not done *by* her, the poem argues, but to her. The poem seems to explain Menken's own childlessness as an inevitable, though unwanted, consequence of her public labors.

As poets, both Kemble and Menken deny any true desire for or pleasure in their celebrity, instead detailing for readers the harm done to women's domestic and emotional lives by the attention of media and audiences. Contradicting the public's fear of the performing woman's corruption of men, both suggest their own victimization at the hands of greedy and heartless men (fathers and husbands, as well as theater owners). Subtly challenging antitheatrical discourse, they argue that the commercial nature of celebrity in the mid-century, rather than any inherent flaw in theatrical performance itself, is to blame. As performing women, however, Kemble and

Menken need to show that their objective as writers is not increased exposure. As the next section details, each utilizes the (seemingly innocuous) pose of woman poet to address the problematic gendering and valuation of artistic genius as a counterpoint to her own popular celebrity.

Poetic Genius, the Woman Writer, and Artistic Legitimacy

"Must all lips fall out of sound as the soul dies to be heard?"
Menken "Resurgam," line 76

Menken and Kemble more often link desires for artistic legitimacy and intellectual fulfillment with writing than performance, drawing upon the antitheatrical valuation of printed text over staged action. Mere talent, displayed through embodied performance, might lead to commercial success and popular fame, but true artistic achievement was reserved for productions of the mind, according to mid-century literary discourse (Battersby 6). Hoping to distance themselves from both the common stage actor and the "scribbling" female novelists derided by Nathaniel Hawthorne and others, Kemble and Menken more closely identify with the British Romantic poet.[8] Jonas Barish writes of the "natural antipathy between romanticism and theater," with the Romantic cult of inwardness, privacy, and solitude fostering a "puritanical distrust of qualities like mimicry, ostentation, and spectacle" (299). Through figures such as Lord Byron and Goethe's Werther, Romanticism offered its own brand of celebrity, but one dismissive of audiences and worldly concerns alike. The interiority and independence assumed and authorized by Romanticism, however, presented obvious difficulties for the woman poet, whose immediate responsibilities to home and family were the very "worldly concerns" rejected by the serious poet.

In keeping with expectations for respectable feminine expression, Kemble and Menken cannot claim to possess artistic genius, but they might question the discourse that authorizes it in others. Denying not their own talent or impulse but (gender-appropriately) the ambition, elitism, and authority assumed by the revered poet within prevalent literary discourse, Kemble and Menken represent artistic achievement in their writings through the figure of Genius, an artist so sublime that he nearly transcends mortality. Approaching genius as a discourse of power authorizing legitimacy for male artists only, Kemble and Menken frame women's exclusion as not only unfair, but unwise. Claiming a woman's heart to balance male mind (and thus satisfying readers by their conventionality), both subtly suggest the absurdity of such binary formulations. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Margaret Fuller similarly argues for the growth of Man rather than either men or women; with that neutral proposition masking any more subversive intentions, she then details the unique strengths and talents of women. Anne Boyd argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas about genius, taken up by Fuller and other American writers, made the role of artist accessible to women by combining "elitist and democratic tendencies in an idealistic view of the artist who doesn't pursue art for art's sake but for humanity's and truth's sake" (19). Positing Genius's single-minded ambition as inherently masculine, cold, disembodied, and isolated, Kemble and Menken as woman artists contrast their own human bodies as warm, maternal, moral, and connected. In poems, they balance Genius with the feminine figure of Love, arguing that she is not his foil but his equal. Kemble and Menken recognize Genius and Love not as inherent personal qualities, but publicly-authorized roles, and challenge the gendered discourse that implies otherwise. While Kemble utilizes Genius and Love as traditional allegorical figures, suggesting each as aspects of her own artistic identity, Menken more pointedly addresses her relegation to the role of Love, and her desire to

claim the power of Genius. Projecting public fears about performing women onto male writers, Kemble and Menken illustrate how artistic values (ego, creativity, ambition) denied to women are validated and celebrated in men.

Where the actress is seen as duplicitous in antitheatrical discourse, Kemble warns about the manipulative artifice of the Genius. Though the actress is fully aware of playing a part, Genius seems to believe himself truly immortal, and thus exempt from the complex and often compromising terms of human interaction. Kemble's poem "The Fellowship of Genius" (1847) contrasts Genius with the merely mortal man (who is nonetheless implicitly gendered female), suggesting he acts as muse to the artist.

> O hearts of flesh! O beating hearts of love!
> O twining hands of human dear desire!
> How, when your glorious mate begins to move,
> How shall ye follow those wide wings of fire
> That bear him up? Ah! To the chariot wheels,
> That wrap the child of genius to the sky (1-6)

The muse is abandoned when Genius sees his chance at glory: borne upward on "wide wings of fire," mortal man attempts to hold onto him but cannot, and "ye fall fainting down despairingly!" (4, 8). Powerfully addressing the reader as "you" and "thou," one of the mortals soon to be abandoned by Genius, the speaker suggests she has experienced this rejection already and can thus speak with authority on the subject. The speaker matter-of-factly explains that love is not all to Genius, as it is to mortals; to him "[l]ove is but one sweet chord, one single verse, / In the great chorus of the universe" (27-8). Kemble is likely drawing upon Byron's line from *Don Juan*, in which Julia tells Juan that she does not regret giving up everything for love, as it is her nature to do so: "Man's love is of his life a thing apart, / 'Tis woman's whole existence" (I.194.1-2). Whether we read Kemble's assumed objectivity as ironic or straightforward, she seems to be exploring gender as a point of view, a position characterized through speech and the

values one claims, resulting here in a staged conflict between masculine Genius and the feminine mortal. This agrees with Boyd's contention that a "certain amount of rejection of society's gender codes was necessary for women to understand themselves as artists" in the period (39). The feminine is an essential aspect of Genius, Kemble's poem argues, but one which ultimately must be transcended in order to achieve (or assume the pose of) greatness.

The mortal/reader is warned not to be deceived by Genius's acts of friendship: "Awhile he stood beside ye, and awhile / His tender eyes, and lovely loving smile, / Made you believe he was indeed your brother" (13-15). The repetition of "awhile" and double use of "love" in "lovely loving" suggests Genius's willful manipulation of the human desire for connection, almost lulling the mortal/reader into a trance-like state of passive belief. The speaker warns the mortal that, though made to feel special by Genius's attention, "Thou shalt be reaped by this bright son of Jove. / One flower 'mid the whole harvest of the world – " (32-33). The artist appropriates human experience (and, if need be, the human himself) and transforms it to art.[9] Kemble literalizes Genius as a human-like figure in the poem, but one who ultimately rejects the all-too-human limitations of love and loyalty, desiring instead to dwell alone in the realm of Art. Contradicting its own title, the poem argues that there is, in fact, no lasting "fellowship" with (or likely among) genius.

Kemble's "Genius and Love" (1847) dramatizes the conflict between Genius's ascent and mortal man's earthly trajectory through an allegory of romantic intimacy. Where the common man was used by Genius in the previous poem (at least participating, if indirectly, in his art), here, given the name Love, he is simply abandoned. The explicit gendering of the two figures is again male, suggesting Kemble's conviction of the hierarchical relation of gendered qualities in her own artistic identity. Kemble privatizes the ambition of genius within a domestic relationship

in order to illustrate its destructive potential as an unavoidable aspect of its creative production. The poem begins with an idyllic couple and setting: "Genius and Love together stood / . . . / [and] hand in hand they smiling, strayed" (1, 5). Love offers Genius a wreath of roses for his brow, but Genius cannot rest until he achieves a crown of stars. Love is content with the things of this world, believing that their bond makes this place the best of all places: a home. Genius, however, keeps looking up, following the eagle's flight and imagining the prizes to be gained in realms far-away. Love continually asks, "Is there a home for us up there?" not realizing that Genius will happily pursue the course alone (40). When Genius flies toward the sun, Love believes he will return at dusk with "sated soul and weary wing" (61). Genius had already flown too far, however, and was crowned by the stars, never to return to earth or to Love. Significantly, where Love had lovingly placed the wreath of roses on his head, the sky's crowning of Genius is much less personal and tender: "from the blue, a glorious crown / Of starry light was towards him thrown" (64-65). From his home (alone) on earth, Love can see Genius's "immortal circlet" burning in the sky, realizing he will never return, and cries himself to sleep (66).

In Kemble's poem, Genius chooses immortal fame over personal love, leaving his merely human companion alone and bereft. Wolosky argues that women writers' ambivalence about ambition not only reflects resentment at gendered restriction but doubt about public values: "Women's protests against the limits of their sphere did not necessarily mean endorsing the male 'world' and wishing to enter it, in which ambition was fast becoming the defining and paramount value, pursued through unbridled competition, with its offshoots of corruption, exploitation, and impoverishment in American life" (*Poetry* 43). Kemble's framing of the pursuit of genius as a corruption of the domestic bond helps to affirm her own status as a traditional woman who values love above all things, while at the same time questioning the gender assumptions and

values associated with contemporary artistic discourse. Furthermore, by utilizing the figurative distance of allegory, she claims a purely theoretical relation to the debate.

Menken's response to Genius more explicitly addresses her own access to artistic legitimacy, framing her ambition as a troubled inheritance from male supporters. During her most prolific period of writing, Menken identified herself with the bohemian subculture gathering in and around New York's Pfaff's restaurant and bar in the early 1860s. While bohemianism initially gave an intellectual cast to her claims of victimization, its promise as a truly progressive artistic community soured. In an article titled "The Bohemians" in *The Great Metropolis* (1869), Junius Henri Browne affectionately remembers America's "original" bohemians, including "the ill-fated Adah Menken" (qtd. in Menken 276). Browne explains how the group of journalists and writers emerged as a counterbalance to public opinion, having "comprehensive views the great mass cannot take" (277). Browne devotes a paragraph to each of the nine male "originals," but combines the women into one shared paragraph, denying them full membership in the group and referring to them instead as the bohemians' "feminine companions at Pfaff's" (276). Considered muse rather than full-fledged bohemian by critics, Menken came to understand that the group's professed commitment to egalitarian principles did not make her actual acceptance any more likely. Her poems on genius lament this divide between discourse and practice in the American arts community, and its implications for the actress who would be a poet.

Menken's poem "My Heritage" (1860) argues that the woman who possesses the spark of Genius, "the glorious light of intellect," cannot realize it, but instead must watch it expire (39). The epigraph to the poem in its first printing was, according to Menken, an extract from New Orleans poet/critic J.W. Overall's letter to her: "Why are your letters so sad? Forget the world –

laugh at poverty. Be glad and happy with your heritage of genius." Overall's words suggest that Menken's awareness of her talent should make her immune to sadness and untroubled by material concerns. Menken, in response, argues that such transcendence is only possible for the male artist, as her marginalization within the bohemian community proved. As a result, confidence in her talent does not satisfy, but only infuriates. In notes for a planned autobiography, Menken writes, "My father concentrated all pride of learning in me because he thought I had *genius* – that mysterious something that surmounts all difficulties" (204). The idea of genius as a (broken) promise handed down from a father-figure or strong male reoccurs in several of Menken's poems, and serves to frame her artistic aspirations and frustrations within a familial or intimate relationship. In the following poems, those who authorize literary legitimacy appear as father figures with the power of granting or denying the woman-child's entry.

Arguing against Overall's epigraph and Menken's father's hopes, the speaker of "My Heritage" contemplates her own status as "the veriest slave of time / And circumstances" (5-6). She considers herself an "unshielded victim," "Fortune's toy," serving others' desires rather than her own (8, 6). Her actual "heritage" as a woman artist is to labor for the "Pleasure" of audiences and "Gain" of theater owners:

> 'My Heritage!' It is to live within
> The marts of Pleasure and of Gain, yet be
> No willing worshipper at either shrine;
> To think, and speak, and act, not for my pleasure,
> But others'. (1-5)

Denied the fellowship of genius, the woman artist is forced to exploit her talents as a stage performer. She is less concerned with economic exploitation than artistic or intellectual, which she imagines is brought about by the public's demand for visual spectacle. Gregory Eiselein

notes Menken "knew acting paid far better than poetry," but considered writing a higher calling (22).

Three times she mockingly refers to "My heritage!" (1, 23, 42) and details why it is a curse, not a gift. Blaming her own "O'ermastering Pride" (16) and "Soul-subduing Poverty" (19) for continuing to appear on stage, while knowing its falseness, she reveals the damage done:

> Affections, which are passions, lava-like
> Destroying what they rest upon. Love's
> Fond and fervid tide preparing icebergs
> That fragile bark, this loving heart. (12-15)

Rather than courting neglect, as would masculine Genius, she admits to desiring the very thing which will destroy her. Fully objectified, both by the shallow "Affections" of audiences and her growing dependence on it, the speaker is forced to watch as her own genius expires:

> Mine to watch
> The glorious light of intellect
> Burn dimly, and expire: and mark the soul,
> Though born in Heaven, pause in its high career,
> Wave in its course, and fall to grovel in
> The darkness of earth's contamination. (44-49)

In the final lines, she likens herself to various figures – "dying eagle" (56), "timid little flower" (59), "foolish waves" (60) – who naively seek fellowship among the great and strong, and closes in exasperation, "Yet this is what men call Genius" (62). Her all-too-human (and appropriately feminine) heart may ensure her social respectability, but Menken claims it erodes her self-respect as an artist.

In Menken's "Miserimus" (1868), the speaker takes a more cynical look at the discourse authorizing artistic achievement and her own victimization. Genius is represented here by the shadowy figures of the Bards, an established, experienced group the speaker looks to for guidance and direction, even mentorship. The Bards take on a sinister guise, standing as

"sentinels on the Lonely Hill" of Song, guarding their domain from her in order to heighten their own status (16). Menken, like Kemble, represents the distance between Genius and the common man spatially – with genius on high, transcendent, and the mortal man below him on earth. The speaker repeatedly admonishes the Bards for failing to deliver on their promise to lead her to "the land of song," with five lines repeatedly beginning "You promised . . ." (6, 8, 10, 12, 13). She had believed not just in her own talent, but in the rhetoric of genius's singular and boundless creativity; the Bards promised she "should create a new moon of Poesy" (12) that would shimmer "like burning / arrows, down into the deep heart of the dim world" (14-15). Through immortal fame, she imagined her song would enlighten the world, "ring trancing shivers of rapt / melody down to the dumb earth" (6-7), and that "its echoes should vibrate till Time's / circles met in old Eternity" (8-9). She refers to the Bards as "weak heritors of passion and pain!" (1), indicating that their promise to her is in fact a curse. Drawing on the double-meaning of "promise" as one's own personal talent or potential *and* another's commitment to favor you, Menken sees the label of genius as a trick, since her potential is cancelled out by their authority to either affirm or deny it. Genius as a "promise" is something that limits the bearer's horizon of vision but denies her any satisfaction; she can see "Only the red fire of Genius, that narrows up life's chances / to the black path that crawls on to the dizzy clouds" (20-21).

While positing her own victimization at the hands of Genius, it is important that the speaker also acknowledge the sincerity of her own (feminine) motivations as an artist. The poem suggests that the Bards' power blinds them to the joys and desires of the human world; they are "Dwellers in the shadowy Palace of Dreams!" (2). In fact, in seeking the Bards' status, the speaker becomes like them in loneliness (though denied their exalted label). She questions why she was led by them, "[w]ith your unmated souls flying insanely at the stars!" (3), and eventually

she falls "unmated" herself, from sky into sea, back to the realm of the body (25-26). This suggests that the *pursuit* of artistic fame is as damaging for the woman as its full achievement may be for the man. The poem ends in angry indignation: "O Genius! Is this thy promise! / O Bards! Is this all?" (27-28). This is likely a direct attack on the elitist and exclusionary aspects of the contemporary discourse on genius, which suggest a culturally authorized artistic identity negates or ignores the domestic/intimate realm of feeling that defines women's lives. Her body, whether as biological woman or stage performer (or the powerful combination of the two), excludes her from literary genius, but it also makes her aware of the limitations of a purely intellectual identity.

In stark contrast to her poems on genius that lament the woman artist's frustrated destiny, Menken's free verse "Genius" (1860) mimics the style of motivational public address and unequivocally celebrates the power of genius in transforming the world. Here, Menken touts the very party line that she revealed as false (or at least cruel) in earlier poems. The poem begins:

> Genius is power.
> The power that grasps in the universe, that dives out beyond space, and grapples with the starry worlds of heaven.
> If genius achieves nothing, shows us no results, it is so much the less genius.

Instead of bitter expressions of unrealized greatness, here the speaker argues that there is no such thing as unappreciated talent: "It is all nonsense. / Where power exists, it cannot be suppressed any more / than the earthquake can be smothered" (30-32). What is more, "Circumstances cannot control genius: it will nestle with / them: its power will bend and break them to its path. / This very audacity is divine" (15-17). Consistent with contemporary criticism of celebrity, Menken writes that genius is God-given greatness, which concerns itself only with immortality: "Neglect is but the fiat to an undying future. / To be popular is to be endorsed in the To-day and /

forgotten in the To-morrow" (53-55). This accords perfectly with the received script on Genius, what Leo Braudy terms "the posture of reticence and the sanction of neglect" (1072), showing that Menken can perform it with the best of them, even if she no longer believes it. The poem ends with calls to "Fling out the banner!" and honor the godly power: "O Genius! Proud Genius, all hail!" (69, 79). Placed beside her lyric poems on genius, the poem provides a striking example of the difference between the dominant discourse on genius and her own experiences as a woman artist. While in theory an egalitarian and progressive force, represented in "Genius" by the distinctly Emersonian voice, in reality the status of Genius was reserved (by the conferring few) for a select few.

In the popular press, Menken only achieved respectability after her early death and the subsequent publication of *Infelicia*; then "her image as a kindhearted and thwarted genius" grew (Sentilles, "Identity" 131). Only when her literary productions eclipsed her performance popularity – literally, when her body no longer appeared on the public stage – could she be taken seriously as a woman with sincere and valuable ideas. Sentilles notes that Menken's contemporaries rarely suggested that the poetry, what readers regarded as "the expression of the 'real Menken,'" was itself a performance ("Identity" 132). Rather, they congratulated themselves for seeing and appreciating the real woman, the victim society had scorned. Readers, particularly middle-class white women, according to Sentilles, came to Menken's defense, seeing her not as a willful sinner but a victim of modern society and even "a sort of martyr to women," considering her struggle against a world that stifled her potential (*Performing* 266). As they had with Kemble upon her debut, American audiences raised their own status by recognizing and celebrating Menken's talent, demonstrating that the ability to recognize genius becomes nearly as important in mid-century culture as the ability to achieve it oneself (Stadler 110). *Infelicia* went through

over a dozen editions and remained continuously in print in the United States for nearly 40 years after its initial publication. Sentilles writes that the subtle, tasteful, "refined appearance" of *Infelicia* – leather-bound cover, letter from Charles Dickens accepting her dedication, unglamorous portrait of Menken, fragment of verse (later attributed to Swinburne), then her 31 poems – "surprised and influenced readers . . . [for] it looked like literature" (*Performing* 264). Encouraging audiences, in this case, to "judge a book by its cover," Menken's self-presentation scripted readers' attention and acceptance. Proving once again the value of careful costuming and set decoration, this final poetic performance, offered as "the woman herself," cemented the artistic respect and public regard she struggled to secure while living.

In addressing the discourse that denies them the status of true artist, both as women and as stage performers, Kemble and Menken reveal its hypocrisy. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller applies the term "genius" to female public performers – actresses, Quaker preachers, reform speakers – a total of eight times. Like Kemble and Menken, Fuller contrasts female excellence, which she terms the "acting out" of inspiration and intelligence, with male "ideas" and unrealized conception (14, 33). Positioning themselves to champion this conception of genius, Kemble and Menken reject the Romantic figure of the reticent, masculine mind as the only viable model for the artist. Defending the values of a distinctly feminine genius, however, they inevitably (or purposefully) attract attention to their female bodies. Skillfully, Kemble and Menken draw on the established trope of women's bodies as patently authentic and sincere, because private, by reframing their publicity, in poetry, as genuine expression rather than calculated display. In the final set of poems considered in this chapter, the woman's body returns to the performance stage, claiming its full power at last.

The Female Body in Performance and Text

"Now I gloss my pale face with laughter, and sail my voice / on with the tide"
Menken "Myself," lines 14-15

Kemble and Menken established feminine respectability in poems decrying celebrity and projected feminine sincerity through poems on genius. Perhaps the most difficult hurdle for them to cross in crafting a legitimate artistic persona was the specter of their female bodies on the public stage. "In 'abandoning' her assigned place," Carol Mattingly argues, the female celebrity "forfeited the privilege of a pretended unawareness of physical details given 'respectable' women" (22). While the public fascination with the female form objectifies women, it also allows them to learn "from watching themselves being watched" how best to use appearances and images to affect audiences on stage and in writing (Mattingly 140). Because audiences cannot get past the actress-poet's gendered body (actual or imagined), neither can she, so she must write through it in order to assert a social respectable, artistically legitimate, and personally empowered self. Recognizing, as Mattingly observes, that "the reading of women's bodies played a major role in their ability to be taken seriously" (40), Kemble and Menken present alternative readings of their performance bodies in poetry.

Given what Mullenix terms "the unprecedented critical preoccupation with the female body during the 1860s" (*Wearing* 17), as well as her questionable standing as a socially respectable woman, Menken's body was particularly ill-treated in the press. An article from the Savannah *Daily News and Herald* of 26 November 1867, equates her, suggestively, with her powerful horse and co-star in *Mazeppa*, Haidee Ulazeen: "Menken is intoxicating the Londoners at 'Astley's,' and is stouter and less clothed than ever. All efforts to subdue the 'fiery, untamed steed' have failed" ("Menken is").[10] Mark Twain, who saw Menken in *Mazeppa* and *The French Spy* at Tom Maguire's Opera House in San Francisco in 1863, concluded "she goes on her

shape" rather than talent and is therefore the only "body in town" of public interest (199, 197). Even the title of Twain's review, "The Menken – Written Especially for Gentlemen," advertises his level of interest in her work. A retrospective on Menken's career from 1882, titled "A Wayward Beauty," similarly reflects that she had no theatrical talent, only physical attractiveness: "She was not an actress, but only a beautiful woman who adopted the stage as the best profession in which to display her loveliness." Menken's womanly appeal seems to discount any other claims for theatrical performance beyond stoking male audience desire.

Journalists often focused on Kemble's eyes as indicators of her inner feelings, aligning her more closely with a privileged interiority than their attention to Menken's legs allowed.[11] An 1832 article from the Washington D.C. *United States' Telegraph* describes Kemble's debut as Bianca at the Park Theatre:

> Miss Kemble, in figure, is rather petite, but symmetrically formed. Her face is pleasing, indeed, we may say captivating: the forehead is not high, but it is broad and intellectual – her features are strongly marked and well formed – the eye dark, large, and penetrating – it is commanding, and her glance, whether of love, of hate, or of revenge, speaks more than words. Many of her looks had an electrical effect on the audience, and we must confess, that more than once, in her passionate scenes it sent a thrill down our whole frame. ("Miss Fanny Kemble")

Consistent with the ideal feminine, Kemble's movements are authentic and thus naturally persuasive. The focus on Kemble's eyes and face – literally "her looks" – reduces the actress's representation of character to "her glance" that "speaks more than words." An 1840 article from the New York *Morning Herald* similarly focuses on Kemble's eyes, though in this instance Kemble is a member of the audience for Austrian ballerina Fanny Elssler: "Her eyes alone gave token of the existence of the soul of genius within – for it flashed and brightened with every variety of hue, as the Elssler floated around in her exquisite movements." The dancer's body moves on stage, but Kemble's eyes seem strangely distinct from her own body. Without giving

any details of the ballet performance itself, the article closes by detailing how "every opera glass, oft and again, was directed to [Kemble's] seat" ("Fanny Kemble at the Park"). She is less a body here than an object or curiosity; the subject of everyone's discussion and observation, the very "gaze" and "theme" she feared becoming in her poems on fame.[12]

New media surrounding celebrity at mid-century literalized the objectification of women's bodies. Through photography, the actress could see herself as the characters she represented on stage, much as she appeared to her audiences. Capitalizing on the appeal of the actress on the public stage, photographic technology captured the spectacle of the female body in performance for private viewing. Invented in the late 1830s, photography helped to transform the theater "by promoting the assumption that visual representation was not just one element but the central core of the theatrical experience" (Dudden 63). By the 1850s shopkeepers displayed daguerreotypes of popular actors in their windows and by the following decade, fans were collecting *cartes de visite* (mounted photographs) of their favorite players. As early as 1859, Menken began advertising herself through the new medium of photography, and by the early 1860s she became the most photographed woman in the world (Dudden 161). 1861, the year of her debut in *Mazeppa*, was also the year when *cartes de visite* became widely available, making the performance spectacle portable and strangely personal for the individual audience member. "In such photos actresses could exploit – or be exploited by – close-ups, head shots, and full-body images. They were not limited to the views from a distance traditionally available to the live audience in a playhouse," notes Dudden (161). Unable to avoid the visual as the "central core of theatrical experience," Menken and Kemble re-privatize it in different ways through their poetry, exploring alternatives and opportunities denied them on the actual stage.

In a letter to John Camden Hotten, dated 17 March 1868, Menken expresses displeasure with the publisher's choice of a photograph for *Infelicia*: "I am satisfied with all you have done except the portrait. I do not find it to be in character with the volume. It looks *affected*. Perhaps I am a little vain – all women are – but the picture is certainly not beautiful. I have portraits I think are beautiful. I dare say they are not like me, but I posed for them" (240). Stating both that her portrait should be "in character" with her poems and that her most beautiful photographs "are not like me," she suggests that the appropriate photo should capture the ideal image of the woman poet, rather than her own likeness. Clearly she understands the constructedness of both her poetic self and her stage persona as she aims to keep the visual associated with her poems consistent with cultural ideas about the female artist (beautiful because unaffected). The letter's combination of female assertiveness, in asking for a change to be made, and feminine demure, in claiming not to think herself beautiful, strikingly illustrates Menken's attitude toward her body's centrality to all her art, even her literary productions.

Where Menken actively manufactures visuals for stage performance and poetry, Kemble initially reads (and writes) her body as the "problem" making her public when she would remain private. Kemble responds to her photographic image in the 1844 poem "Sonnet to a Lady [Mrs. Anna Jameson], who wrote under my likeness as Juliet, 'Lieti giorni e felice.'" Aside from the "To Shakespeare" poems, "Sonnet to a Lady" is the only time Kemble explicitly presents herself as a stage performer in her poetry. Translated from the Italian, Jameson's note reads "Pleased and happy days," suggesting that those were blissful times for Kemble. Figured as body by the photo, the poem's speaker plays upon this: "Whence should they come, lady! those happy days / That thy fair hand and gentle heart invoke / Upon my head?" (1-3). She establishes a contrast between Jameson as "lady" and herself as "girl," claiming the one cannot understand the other:

"The light of such [a life as mine] lives not in thine own lays" (6). She contrasts the glaring gaslight she walks in with her friend's privileged privacy. As abstracted as Kemble feels by the photo and the message, she abstracts Jameson, who was in fact a life-long friend, into an unknown admirer.[13]

Beyond the pose of dutiful daughter (to family) or sacrificial lamb (to culture), the figure in this poem seems to serve something for which she feels no real affection: the public. Kemble reflects, without referring to herself directly, that such happy days as Jameson imagined "do not rise / On any, of the many, who with sighs / Bear through this journey-land of woe, life's yoke" (3-5). She is nothing *but* body here – merely a human body that toils and bears its load. She responds to both texts – the photograph and the note – as inaccurate representations of her experience and instead counts herself among those "of mortal birth," perhaps reminding her admiring "fan" that she is in fact human and fragile. Kemble refers to Jameson's inscription as invocation, prayer, and wish, indicating the admirer's feeling of investment in the performer's personal life (2, 8, 11). Simply hoping to endure "life's troubled hours" (13), saddled by everyone's expectations of her, the speaker can only ask them to "wish" not more but less for (and of) her: "Not more of joy to me, but less of pain" (12). She reduces herself and all of her aspirations to body here (a genderless body, no less), willfully refusing to signify or represent, in order to deny anyone else's claims on her. Where Menken invites and encourages identification with her body through ambiguity and multiplicity, Kemble complicates (or here, refuses) identification by stripping her public body of the gender that subjects it to others' projections.

A woman's voice – whether actual or figurative – was acceptable in a way her physical body could never be. Voice, in fact, was a powerful trope used in sentimental literature to convey the "natural" persuasive power of women as domestic instructors and moral guides. Critics of the

public woman did not fear the sound of her voice, Mattingly observes, but her Medusian power to blind those who look upon her (138). Representing their own performing bodies through the trope of voice in poems, Kemble and Menken mitigate the perceived risk of the visual by emphasizing the aural and effectively transforming their acting bodies into artist's bodies.

In a poem written fifteen years after "Sonnet to a Lady," by which point Kemble had established herself as a dramatic reader rather than actress, the speaker claims a more favorable view of her work. Instead of a site of struggle and misunderstanding, her performing body becomes the vehicle for artistic expression. While she often sought to minimize attention to her body in actual performance, Kemble's second "To Shakespeare" (1859) highlights and even sexualizes the body, empowering instead of denigrating it. Still, she focuses on ears and mouths, stressing verbal rather than visual aspects of physicality. As in the other poems of this name, she initially assumes the position of meek interpreter to Shakespeare as mighty master:

> Oft, when my lips I open to rehearse
> Thy wondrous spells of wisdom and power,
> And that my voice and thy immortal verse
> On listening ears and hearts I mingled pour,
> I shrink dismayed – and awful doth appear
> The vain presumption of my own weak deed. (1-6)

The prevalence of bodies is striking here. Because of the intimate "mingling" of her voice and his words, she senses his presence and "I tremble as I read - / Thee an invisible auditor I fear" (8-9). If he actually did appear as audience, she claims she would pray to him: "To make me equal to my noble task, / Succour from thee, how humbly would I ask, / Thy worthiest works to utter worthily" (12-14). Even in this imagined exchange, she relies on auditory communication and ignores the visual. W.D. King suggests that, in her readings, Kemble is "channeling, as a medium, the immortal spirit of Shakespeare" (205). I would argue, instead, that while she certainly revered Shakespeare, Kemble also understood her own role in making him better

known and appreciated by modern audiences, emphasizing the dramatic reader's role in service to culture, rather than self. She performs with a will and opinion of her own (one that could potentially injure or offend the playwright's own project, if handled poorly). Her concern with remaining true to the playwright's intention positions her not as medium but as translator, with conscious control over her choices on stage.[14]

In Kemble's third "To Shakespeare" (1859), the Bard initially appears a gentle but firm husband whose "sublime control" guides and directs his "weaker partner['s]" work as reader (4, 2). Kemble places herself below him in stature and worth, speaking specifically as one who "reads the wondrous records" of his pen. Then she addresses him as a fatherly, Christ-like figure who has saved her from poverty and profligacy:

> From sordid sorrows thou has set me free,
> And turned from want's grim ways my tottering feet,
> And to sad empty hours, given royally,
> A labour, than all leisure far more sweet:
> The daily bread, for which we humbly pray,
> Thou gavest me as if I were thy child. (7-12)

The pose of the dutiful and thankful child is consistent with Kemble's understanding of Shakespeare as her cultural and artistic father. Deirdre David argues that Kemble imagined Shakespeare as a replacement for her own father, who selfishly profited from her performances throughout his life (230). Perhaps instead her use of familial language in poems on Shakespeare purposely invites such an interpretation from her readers, serving more to illustrate her rhetorical pose as dutiful daughter than to reflect any deep-seated psychological transference. The familial frame justifies her adoration of Shakespeare, placing it safely within a domestic context, but it also suggests that she carries out the work and words of her father-artist here on earth.

After addressing his material aid and how he provides for her physical needs, Kemble thanks Shakespeare for more spiritual gifts. The poem ends with the speaker thanking fate for first giving her the lack that her master could then satisfy:

> And still with converse noble, wise, and mild,
> Charmed from despair my sinking soul away;
> Shall I not bless the need, to which was given
> Of all the angels in the host of heaven,
> Thee, for my guardian, spirit strong and bland!
> Lord of the speech of my dear native land! (13-18).

The speaker claims his words keep her from sorrow, but they seem oddly verbal/aural here rather than textual; he "charms" her with "converse" and is the lord of English "speech," not words or language or writing. Making the words and works of Shakespeare active, as speech, rather than inactive, as text, Kemble suggests that her work as reader is a dialogue with the author, rather than a forced recitation. Imagining his words in this way, she is not used *by* him – as voice to his text – but performing alongside him. Using her own text to enact Shakespeare's voice, she assumes the role of dramatic author, realizing her own creative potential.

Menken's most empowered expressions of body in poetry also rely on the image of voice or, more specifically, a throat. For her, it is not the words themselves but the physical power of voice – her ability to make sound from the soundless – which is the focus. In this, she can be compared with her contemporary and acquaintance, Walt Whitman. Eiselein notes her extensive use of free verse in the poems selected for *Infelicia*, arguing that she "is the first poet and the only woman poet before the twentieth century to follow the revolution in prosody started by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*" (14). Where Kemble privileges Shakespeare's words, Menken envisions her own *use* of words as the highest good. Whomever "speaks the words most convincingly," in Eiselein's words, may claim them and their power (31). Like Whitman, Menken considers oratory and poetry kindred art forms.

Menken repeatedly emphasizes the physicality of voice by referencing the throat, tongue, and mouth of the performer. In a poem titled "On the Death of Rufus Choate" (1859), Menken says of Choate, the renowned American lawyer and orator (who coincidentally represented Kemble in her divorce from Butler), "Whate'er his mind conceived, his tongue proclaimed" (28). Choate spoke so powerfully that even resistant listeners succumbed to his will, "men of power unto his thoughts gave way" (34). This idealization of the power of voice aligned with the mind of the performer extends also to her own lyric expressions. In the free-verse "Resurgam," the speaker calls herself a "strangled" star, as her "red mouth closed down the breath that was hard and / fierce," leaving her with a "songless soul" (6, 10-11, 8). The mark of her artistic death is "this dumb, living body," a body that cannot voice its will or soul (16). She is left with just enough sound production – "old music for / my tongue" – "to deceive the crawling worms" and prevent them from overtaking her "dead" body (21-22). This seems a direct response to her work as stage performer, voicing others' words but not her own. Her performance of vitality, which masks inner pain, elicits adoration from audiences, but their displays do not satisfy: "Thy kisses are doubtless sweet that throb out an eternal passion for me! / But I feel neither pleasure, passion nor pain" (18-19). Because they fail to see beyond the show of her "fair face" and "laughing brow," their affection brings only pain (42, 46).

Once again denied fellowship among the artists (and utilizing the repeated, accusatory "you promised" as she did in "Miserimus"), the speaker claims that she "died" because she was promised "a new moon of Poesy" that did not come (39):

> And promised that my voice should ring trancing shivers
> of rapt melody down the grooves of this dumb earth.
> And promised that echoes should vibrate along the purple
> spheres of unfathomable seas, to the soundless folds of the clouds.
> And promised that I should know the sweet sisterhood of
> the stars. (42-47)

She is left, instead, with her "fingers grasping the white throat of many a / prayer" (57-58). She imagines the fame and renown denied to her as the absence of connection or communication – a silence: "No mariner lifts his silken banner for my answering hail. / No messages from the living to the dead. / Must all lips fall out of sound as the soul dies to be heard?" (74-76). She aligns the unkept promise for fame with a man's disloyalty (as she did in "Myself"), but claims that no one will know the truth because the "murdered" cannot speak to name their "killer": "[t]here is no voice from the grave" (95). So, while she cannot speak the words to tell her truth, she puts them in writing – "*Ye crucified me*!" – and claims that she will ultimately rise again (111). Silence or lack of physical voice can only be remedied by her turn to the written word, which she uses as a type of threatening *record* of injustices done and punishments still to come. The "you" of the poem is ambiguous – fans (18), the "man I loved" (94), another unseen auditor? – but the assertive projection of her will, voiced through text, is powerfully clear.

This prophetic power of voice appears also in Menken's "Judith" (1868), though here the speaker retains the body's faculty of speech. The speaker, Judith, is the heroine from Jewish legend who saved Israel by killing Holofernes, plying him with food and wine and then impaling a knife in his throat and severing his head from his body. The fact that she "goes for the throat" is significant, and matches up well with Menken's representation of her own forced silence as a malady of the throat in "Resurgam" and other poems. (The heroic utility of the acting woman, too, is central to the legend and the poem.) She opens with an epigraph from Revelation ii.16: "Repent, or I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight thee with the sword of my mouth." The voice or mouth as weapon is a recurring image in Menken's poetry and aligns the performing woman with the powers of vengeance and justice, alike.[15] In the opening lines of this free-verse poem, she attempts to build her confidence in order to prepare for battle, claiming messianic

power, a "Power that will give voice to graves" (18). The graves of the wronged will be able to share their stories (as the unfortunate un-dead could not in "Resurgam"): "These shall speak, each as their voices shall be loosed" (25). Her own power of voice will speak for those who cannot, suggesting the democratic utility of American oratory. Using her voice to serve others, she authorizes it as legitimate, socially respectable women's art. As she threatens the Philistines and waits her chance to kill Holofernes, she imagines holding his head up in victory for all to see. She describes the head and:

> . . . the great mouth opened in
> search of voice, and the strong throat all hot and reeking with
> blood, that will thrill me with wild unspeakable joy as it
> courses down my bare body and dabbles my cold feet! (61-64)

She claims his voice – his power – for her own, and ritually drinks the blood from his throat into her own: "I will strangle this pallid throat of mine on the sweet blood!" (68). She feeds herself on revenge and life-blood, realized through the capacity to speak one's mind and enact one's will.

Menken's speaker closes with a threatening prophecy: "Oh forget not that I am Judith! / And I know where sleeps Holofernes" (75-76). In contrast to the failed promises repeatedly made to her by male mentors in her poems on popular fame and Genius, this powerful closing leaves the reader with no doubt that the speaker is who she claims to be and will, in fact, do what she threatens. Her "inescapably female body" becomes a source of power when merged with a determined mind; in its purposeful embodiment of will, it is superior to the transcendent but bodiless mind of the traditionally-conceived poetic Genius. While Menken drew upon the image of prophecy in her earlier poems, in "Judith" she assumes the body of the prophet and the power of her throat to transform will into act.

Unable to avoid or ignore her feminine body, the actress-poet re-deploys it as text, thus controlling its "meanings" in a way she cannot in bodily form. Kemble and Menken counter

men's documenting of their bodies – the media's "stationary and passive descriptions and illustrations" of the public woman – with their poems, thus "escaping the private pleasurable gaze" of male observers (Mattingly 142). Each ultimately crafts a unified artistic identity, embracing both theatrical and poetic performance as aspects of a viable, and even valuable, public self. Menken, identifying with the emerging bohemian culture, merges the wronged woman of her sentimental verse with the empowered prophet of her Jewish-themed verse, fashioning a feminist orator who exposes the hypocrisy of separate spheres ideology. Bohemian identity, Sentilles argues, "legitimated her experimentation with social forms and gave them an intellectual cast. It was an identity that blended middle-class signifiers of cultivation and fashion yet allowed her to challenge bourgeois notions of respectability" (*Performing* 140). Kemble, capitalizing on elite concerns about the threat of rapidly changing social mores, reassures readers of her own commitment to conservative culture. Aligning herself with dramatic literature, rather than theatrical performance, she makes a career on the stage – as the voice of Shakespeare – both profitable and respectable.

Conclusion: Profit and Loss

The paradox of poetry written for publication (a *display* of interiority) means that both roles – actress and poet – are public identities depending on public opinion for interpretation and approval. Kemble's and Menken's poetry was, in large part, an effort to enhance both their social respectability as women (replacing bodily display and artful representations with interiority "overheard") and their legitimacy as creative artists (countering the antitheatrical bias of acting as unoriginal mimicry). Their poetry about performance privatizes the experience of public exposure, through writing and the lyric form, while at the same time re-publicizing the created privacy as published, circulated product. Leo Braudy writes that the celebrity's existence is

"divided between the self that is sold and the self that sells it" (1074). "Acting out" a conflicted self via published poetry, both Kemble and Menken demonstrate how profoundly a life on stage informed their work on the writer's page. Only by first pretending to share the public's insecurities about performance and assumptions about gender, could the actress-poet ultimately argue against them. Regard for the skill with which the actress-poet negotiates the codes of public and private, however, must not overshadow understanding of the potential repercussions of her failure to do so. Kemble's and Menken's explicit commentary on their simultaneous roles as actress and poet, and the practical benefits of their consolidation, shows their keen understanding of the terms of women's public engagement.

In poems on performance, Kemble and Menken draw a sharp contrast between writing and acting, most often privileging the first and rejecting the latter. In private correspondence, though, both admit the financial independence and security afforded by stage careers, understanding that such freedoms were rarely enjoyed by women of the time. Kemble earned roughly five-hundred dollars per reading and, giving about ten readings per month while touring September through November and March through May, enjoyed an average annual income of around thirty-thousand dollars (Thompson 637). Contemplating writing and acting at the age of 18 in a letter to Harriet St. Leger, Kemble expresses youthful optimism about her ability to maintain both roles concurrently, without harm to either: ". . . if I continue to write, the stage might both help me in and derive assistance from my exercise of the pursuit of dramatic authorship. And the mere mechanical labour of writing costs me so little, that the union of the two occupations does not seem to me a difficulty" (*Journals* 23). In fact, Kemble admits to her friend that while she loves to write, she is unwilling to undergo the "drudgery" of writing as a career. The prospect of writing to earn a living was daunting and, as the sad example of Felicia

Hemans proved for Kemble, earning "hard money after a very hard fashion" (qtd. in David 50-1). While Kemble's choice to act rather than write for a living was (like most things for nineteenth-century women) heavily influenced by others' desires for and expectations of her, it ultimately was a product of her own self-determination. Deirdre David argues, "even if the stage was not her first career choice, it was one she made with agency, forethought, and not solely under pressure from her parents" because she understood that it would place her "beyond the fear of want" (52). Unwilling to risk her social respectability as a public woman, however, Kemble disguised her self-determination behind the more acceptable façade of dutiful daughter and unwilling but obligated public figure. Her poetry affirms her status as True Woman while subtly questioning the cultural values that require such complex and often compromising performances.

Menken's willingness to use her writing to market her stage career, like so many aspects of her celebrity, blurred the line between sincerity and self-promotion. Menken claimed to earn five-hundred dollars per appearance in New York City and "$125,000 in gold" for one-hundred nights in California ("The Menken"). She understood acting and writing as aspects and expressions of the same creative genius (and calculating business mind). In 1861, Menken wrote to a friend:

> I do not give all my heart out in my writings – I mean for publication. Let me confess that I sometimes effect to do so when writing of something I know nothing about. But public writing is like acting – to reach the hearts of others we must appear in earnest ourselves. We must convey the idea that we feel and suffer all that we portray. It would be absurd to say that an actor is a part of every part he represents; and the same of the poet. It is the art of each to portray the passions and emotions of the whole great human heart. (qtd in Sentilles, *Performing* 19)

She "effects" to "appear in earnest" in her writings and her stage performances alike, aiming to "give out" not herself but a performance of self that will better satisfy the audience's desires and her own ends. As Menken reveals, the poet "represents" and "portrays," no less than the actress.

Menken's blending of fact and fiction in her own self-presentation, according to Sentilles, made her appealing to a wide range of contemporary audiences, as well as twenty-first-century scholars ("Identity" 146). The persistence of continuing critical debates over her "true" identity – African-American, Jewish, lesbian – only proves how prescient Menken's insights into performed personhood actually were.

Kemble's and Menken's poetry was as purposeful and public as any of their stage performances and, at times, decidedly pragmatic. Menken wrote and published with an aim to sell, as she admits above and in a December 1864 letter to her publicist, Ed James. Writing to James in New York from London, Menken expresses concern with his delay in gathering her poems from the *Sunday Mercury* for her collection *Infelicia* and the timing of its publication: "If I only had my poems *now*, they could be 'out' for the holidays – the book season of England" (235). Kemble, too, wrote for readers as determinedly as she acted and read for audiences. In fact, Kemble's first *Poems* collection in 1844, according to Ann Blainey, was published expressly for the purpose of buying back her horse, Forrester, which had been sold off by her husband when they sailed for Europe (211). Such determined efforts at self-sufficiency and financial independence help to remind us that the actress-poet was a role fueled as much by necessity as any other concern.

Against essentialist views of gender, class, and culture, and the binary constructions used to describe them – male/female, public/private, elite/working, genius/celebrity – the actress-poet (herself a hybrid) argues that identity is not fixed, but performed. Published in the 1844 collection mentioned above, Kemble's side-by-side poems named "A Wish" offer an appropriate conclusion to this chapter on poetry as a public performance of privacy. Appearing on consecutive pages, the poems seem identical at first glance, but upon closer inspection contain

important differences, with the first locating immortality in transcendent artistic fame and the second in personal love and memory. The first "A Wish" reads as follows:

> Let me not die for ever! when I'm gone
> To the cold earth; but let my memory
> Live like the gorgeous western light that shone
> Over the clouds where sank day's majesty.
> Let me not be forgotten! though the grave
> Has clasped its hideous arms around my brow,
> Let me not be forgotten! though the wave
> Of time's dark current rolls above me now.
> Yet not in tears remembered be my name;
> Weep over those ye loved; for me, for me,
> Give me the wreath of glory, and let fame
> Over my tomb spread immortality!

Here is the second poem, with bold text showing differences from the first:

> Let me not die for ever! when I'm **laid**
> **In** the cold earth; but let my memory
> Live **still among ye, like the evening shade,**
> **That o'er the sinking day steals placidly.**
> Let me not be forgotten! though the **knell**
> Has **tolled for me its solemn lullaby,**
> Let me not be forgotten! though **I dwell**
> **For ever now in death's obscurity.**
> Yet **oh! upon the emblazoned leaf of fame,**
> **Trace not a record not a line for me,**
> **But let the lips I loved oft breathe my name**
> **And in your hearts enshrine my memory!**

Both poems employ a repeated image in lines 6 and 11, and this acts as shorthand to indicate the different messages offered in each. In the first poem, death's arms encircle the speaker's head and then a "wreath of glory" (the same image used to represent fame in "Thou Poisonous Laurel Leaf") replaces it. In the second, the sound of funeral bells is replaced by the sound of loved ones' voices calling her name (echoing Love's sweet words to Genius in "Genius and Love"). The speaker of the first poem wants immortal fame and honor, not personal expressions of grief, indicating that she values public regard more highly than familial. The speaker of the second

poem desires the opposite, not an impersonal record of greatness but the voiced memory of loved ones, indicating that she values the domestic as genuine and dismisses celebrity as false.

Though offering these ideas through the highly personal lyric "I," Kemble resists claiming either perspective by staging them as a pair, side-by-side. Distinctions between and valuations of publicity and privacy represented an ongoing point of struggle for Kemble even, as indicated by their publication in 1844, during her period away from the stage. Her ironic presentation of internal conflict via lyric certainty is a powerful way to convey the influence of public opinion (and internalized conventions) on a sense of self. In her own way, Kemble demonstrates poetry's capacity for artful representation of character, revealing the poet as an actress too. Unwilling (or unable) to choose *between* fame and love, public and private, the actress-poet chooses both.

CHAPTER THREE

"'Tis Angels Speak to You To-day":[1]
Ritual, Reform, and Prophecy in the Poetry of Achsa Sprague

When trance medium Achsa White Sprague took the stage for public lectures, she began by washing her hands and face with imaginary soap and water, ritually cleansing herself of earthly soil before embodying spirit voices from the higher sphere. Spreading the message of Spiritualism through trance lecture – a combination of improvised philosophical explication, messages of hope from departed spirits, songs, and poems channeled through the speaker as medium – Sprague preached a belief that spirits of the dead can communicate with the living and a faith in eternal progress. Making no distinction between her own words and those authored by spirits, Sprague represented her art, both written and spoken, as merged with and fueled by spirit power that lacked individual specificity or ownership, yet materialized through particular bodies and voices like her own. The female trance medium's public empowerment was paradoxically underpinned by sentimental gender ideology since her performance literalized her "natural" powers of intuition, selflessness, and moral influence. According to Andrew Jackson Davis, whose *Philosophy of Spiritual Communication* (1851) provides a framework for understanding spirit communication, the medium is one "through whom 'sounds' are made," allowing spirits to "address the *material* senses of their earthly friends" (97, 81). Making visible and audible the unseen spirit's enduring hopes for mankind, Sprague's demonstration of embodied belief satisfied mid-century American audiences seeking the entertainment of spectacle, the reassurance of religion, and the empirical evidence of science.

How are we, as twenty-first-century critical observers, to read the theatricalized selflessness of the female trance medium? (Watching the opening ceremonies of the 2014

Olympic Games in Sochi, which feature a young female as transcendent witness to an epic vision of national history, I am reminded that it is a powerful trope still.) Placing Sprague within her contemporary historical and cultural contexts, we can better understand how and why mediumship, both narrowly and broadly conceived, served the woman artist in mid-nineteenth-century America. All three public performance roles assumed by Sprague – Spiritualist trance lecturer, reform speaker, and Civil War poet – are informed by the same mediumistic aesthetic, which utilizes concepts and techniques from theater, scientific demonstration, religious revivalism, period oratory, and communal ritual to suggest the speaker's access to an unseen but enduring realm of power and insight. Through written representations of performance practice in poetry and private journals, Sprague also self-consciously engages with continuing debates over woman's proper sphere, the nature of the artist, the individual's responsibility to society, class and race (in)equality, and American exceptionalism. Sprague conceives of mediumship not just as the living's access to the spirit world, but a mode of communication across divides of race, class, time, and circumstance, a view shared by a number of influential women writers in the period. Arguing against a narrow view of Sprague's work as "Spiritualist poetry," this chapter shows how mediumship – as a mode of feminine self-presentation, a means of rhetorical power, and a vehicle for social equality – uniquely (albeit paradoxically) provides a voice for the mid-century American woman artist.

The three aspects of mediumship discussed in this chapter reveal Sprague's work to be a targeted response to the social and political ills of her age rather than a fanciful flight into spirit-land. Just as the assumption of "Medium" as a performance persona validates the words spoken (precisely because they are not her own), so mediumship as a gendered aesthetic produces rhetorical power by denying any claims to it. As a reform speaker, Sprague does not argue *for*

ends, but *from* principles. The ambiguity of concepts like "spirit" and values such as "sympathy" means that an argument for them is really no argument at all; their self-evident nature makes them both widely applicable and generally inoffensive. In contrast to radical reform oratory, inspirational discourses such as Sprague's encourage each audience member to interpret and identify with the medium's message in his or her own way, personalizing and thus taking ownership of it. Likewise, mediumship conceived as a mode of interpersonal connection assumes a universal sympathy of spirit that authorizes one to "speak for" another, without fear of either misunderstanding or misrepresentation – conditions which, in mid-century America, imperiled gender and race equality as well as national unity. The assurance of like-minded spirits (living, dead, and future) as proxies or surrogates for one's own is both comforting and ennobling. Moreover, the centrality of the performance dynamic (both live presence and written/rhetorical) to Sprague's aesthetic becomes evident when we consider how success or failure is determined not by immediate outcomes, but by projection forward (leaving final ends to the nebulous "future"). In this way, mediumship as social action succeeds by never admitting defeat. Mediumship – as persona, rhetorical stance, and worldview – proceeds by *indirection*; it is suggestive and inclusive rather than direct or divisive. As such, it serves the needs of a highly diverse and deeply divided mid-century American audience, as well as the speaking woman herself.

Sprague's message of universal optimism was initially the product of personal hardship and limitation, as was often the case with Spiritualist practitioners, who primarily were young white women from the lower and middle classes (Buescher 139). Born in 1827 in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, the sixth of eight children, she received a primary school education and began teaching school herself at age twelve to help support her family. At the age of twenty, Sprague

was effectively crippled by a debilitating joint disease and forced to give up teaching and an already limited public life. Her sickbed diary and early poems like "Disease," "They Bid me Nerve my Drooping Soul," "Despair," and "Suffer, yet be Strong," chronicled her struggle to submit to fate and bear her burdens quietly during a nearly seven year incapacitation. The turn from private poet to public writer and performer came in 1854 (as recorded in her journal of 17 November 1855) when, as if in answer to her projected prayers, the voice of God healed Sprague's broken body and called her to public service as a Spiritualist lecturer. This material "response" to her prayers, and her commitment to repay it through continued public efforts, established the foundation for Sprague's mediumistic aesthetic, even beyond the Spiritualist platform.[2] Once she became active as a trance lecturer, Sprague travelled and spoke continuously from 1854 through 1861 (Braude 106). Modeling for audiences an active and embodied belief, Sprague presented an inspiring message "made real" though an inspired speaker. Ever mindful of her verbal art's utility, Sprague also wrote and spoke in support of other progressive causes, namely women's rights, abolition, and prison reform. In 1862, the final year of her life, Sprague was again confined to home due to illness, during which time she wrote the long poems and patriotic verse addressed in this chapter. During Sprague's lifetime, a number of individual poems and articles were published, under pen names including "Bell" and "Solitarie," in Spiritualist papers including *Banner of Light*, *World's Paper*, and *Herald of Progress*.[3] Two books of poetry, *I Still Live: A Poem for the Times* (1862) and The Poet *and Other Poems* (1864) were published posthumously.[4]

As a Spiritualist trance lecturer Sprague, along with better known mediums Cora Scott Hatch and Emma Hardinge Brittan, was part of a group that numbered one hundred members touring independently in eleven states by 1859 (Braude 92). The Spiritualist movement provided

a progressive worldview consistent with, and an audience sympathetic to, Sprague's vision of women's active and transformative art. Combining the loving god of Universalism, the Unitarian's universal salvation, the Inner Light of Quaker belief, Swedenborgian faith in human regeneration, the Shakers' gender equality, and Transcendentalist belief in the divinity of nature, Spiritualism brought together various currents in mid-century philosophy, science, and religion. Originating in New York state around 1848, with the "spirit rappings" of the Fox sisters, the Spiritualist movement had two million members in the United States by 1854 (Buescher x). As suggested by its diverse influences, within the Spiritualist belief system and its communal practice, "seeing was believing" (McGarry 31). Religious experience based in psychology rather than theology seemed to offer an empirical basis for belief, as it emphasized reason and emotion over blind faith and orthodoxy. The electrical telegraph developed by Samuel Morse, which successfully sent a message by wire from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore in 1844, became a special symbol for the Spiritualist movement, as it proved the possibility of communicating without face-to-face interaction. The embodiment and materialization of larger, unseen forces such as those realized in the telegraph (and in the trance medium's performances) served as proof of their existence and power. Reassured by faith in natural laws that "give effect to every cause, / [p]roportioned to itself" and spiritual laws promising eternal progress, Sprague believed her own public displays of belief could provide the impetus needed to enact positive change ("The Angel's Visit" 303).[5]

By first considering trance lecture as a type of ritual performance, we can better appreciate its centrality to Sprague's persona, as well as its applicability to the circumstances of the Civil War period. Historically, the best model for mediumship is found in communal rituals that merge spiritual and social worlds through a performance of immanence. Rituals invoke the

authority of a concept larger than the individual in order to reconstitute participants as equal members of an enduring community. Anthropologists use the term "liminal" to describe the temporary but transformative state that occurs in rites of passage, when an initiate is stripped of a previous social identity but has yet to assume the next, so is therefore ambiguously positioned between the two. Like the trance medium, the initiate's condition is that of the "threshold" state; as Victor Turner explains, "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" ("Liminality" 89). The purpose of the rite of passage, and of liminality as its vehicle, is not just the initiate's own transformation but the larger community's reconstitution through the initiate. Through the performance of repetitive communal ritual, the group's unified history is represented, made manifest, and projected forward. Similarly, the medium's bodily transformation on stage as she receives and transmits spirit messages is, in Molly McGarry's words, "an individual experience collectively mobilized" (20). Participants emerge from the rite with a renewed sense of purpose and community, knowing themselves not just as vessels for history, progress, and spirit, but essential operators in "real"-izing it through their own lives.

In trance medium lecture, the speaker takes on the double role of initiate/shaman, inviting the dangers and indeterminacy of the liminal state, so that audience members may connect with and through a renewed sense of structure, continuity, and control over an otherwise uncertain existence. Much like theater, Richard Schechner argues, rituals "don't so much express ideas as embody them. Rituals are thought -in/as-action" (50). Like the actress, in fact, the medium tells a story by acting it out. As a popular religion, Spiritualism "play[s] with and in the contemporary genres of entertainment and belief" (McGarry 29). Where the actress assumes a fictional role, however, the medium theatricalizes a culturally inscribed one by projecting passivity, sympathy,

and selflessness in place of traditionally-conceived character. Both medium and actress, Schechner explains, "exist in the field of a double negative;" performance is located somewhere between "not me" and "not not me" (64). Sprague both *represents* (the immortal spirit of humanity) and *is* (a lower-middle-class, white, New England woman appearing on stage for paying audiences) at once. In this capacity, the trance medium suggests the present day as a stage for realizing timeless and universal principles of equality, charity, and justice, and her audience members as its required actors.

Many contemporary observers – even those sympathetic to Spiritualist belief – were troubled by the mixture of sacred message and profane display that marred some aspects of Spiritualist public practice.[6] In effect, mediums materialized the earlier trend of phantasmagoria – early nineteenth-century entertainments in which paying audiences were brought into dark rooms and, by means of magic lanterns, sound effects, and the like, made to believe they shared the space with specters of the dead. M.E.G., who provides the Introduction to Sprague's 1865 collection, acknowledges that Spiritualism as a whole was "generally unpopular, and involved in no slight degree in crudities, extravagances, and quackery," though he is quick to clarify that Sprague "was herself neither fool nor fanatic" (xi). Sprague herself voiced a desire to avoid overt or excessive theatricality. Her journal of 21 November 1855, recorded, "I do not wish to be a Fanatic [. . .] I shrink from the very idea, but I *do wish* to *act*, to *do* to live an *active* life & have that life one of usefulness" (151). Elizabeth Barrett Browning (who, like Sprague and Margaret Fuller, utilized mesmeric healing for pain relief) criticized the "theatricality of communal spiritual practice," preferring instead the private practice of automatic writing (Oberhausen and Peeters 84). Ralph Waldo Emerson, according to his friend Edwin Whipple, disliked the "vulgarity" of women adopting Spiritualism as a profession, paid to give news of deceased

friends; Emerson dismissed them as "those seamstresses turned into sibyls, who charged a pistareen a spasm!" (qtd. in Buescher 140). This commercial aspect is addressed in a Providence, Rhode Island, newspaper review following Sprague's appearance at Republican Hall. After giving a brief overview of the lecture, the writer closes by mocking the intersection of spirit and materiality inherent in such presentations: "The spirit held forth eloquently – and woke up in due time, when it was announced by brother Somebody that she would speak in Howard Hall next Sunday afternoon and evening, and *all people must buy their tickets at the office* – so that spirits, as well as the poor worms of earth, like to handle a little hard cash" (rpt. in Twynham, "Achsa" 277). If Spiritualist practice was itself a "commodity in [the] ongoing commercial exchange between religion and stage magic," so too was the exposure and "unmasking" of séances and mediums by nineteenth-century stage magicians (Schmidt 158, 159).[7] The very theatrics that helped to generate "proof" in spiritualist displays also made them vulnerable to charges of fraud.

The rhetorical and aesthetic utility of Spiritualist theatrics, particularly as employed by "serious" practitioners such as Sprague, is perhaps best explained through the term *inspired ventriloquism*, which captures both its conscious theatricality in practice and its idealized social purpose. For a woman in public, the assumption of another's voice both frees her to speak and authorizes that speech as valuable. Sprague asserts that true power is echoic, rather than original, manifesting a shared destiny and origin. Moreover, the passivity of the medium is not a sign of personal weakness, but of investment in a larger sphere or community. The inspired medium makes "passivity a productive display;" as a rhetorical entity, hers is "a 'pose' that performs, even as it masks, a particular kind of work" (Stadler 116). The goal of Sprague's art is like-minded response; the centrality of mutual understanding and responsiveness is expressed through repeated emphasis on "echo," "answer," "take up," "reecho," and "return." With communication

idealized as verbalization, the sound of one voice awakens others, "giv[ing] strength to something in me that would speak" (*The Poet* 82). This vision of artistic creation and expression re-considers the dominant discourses on originality, isolated production, and individual genius. Art becomes a question of recovery, integration, mediation, and interpretation rather than a unique or discrete production of the private mind. Sprague argues that her gendered aesthetic offers a corrective to the isolating and self-absorbed tendencies she sees in conventional Romantic lyric. Unlike the Romantic "dreamer," the poet-as-worker seeks to gain a response or spur action, aiming to "bring a burning answer back again" (*The Poet* 31). [8] Even when written, women's public art in practice is modeled on oral precedent, with conversation posited as the ideal art form (Tonkovich 169). A similar view of the woman artist is found in Madame de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), all of which influenced Sprague. Directed outward toward humanity and progress, rather than inward to isolating self-indulgence, women's art becomes a form of social action.

Sprague's longest extant work, *The Poet*, provides the best illustration of this inspired ventriloquism in her mediumistic theory and practice. Since we will revisit the poem throughout the chapter, a brief overview is necessary. Structured as a blank-verse drama, with scene breaks, detailed setting descriptions, and character entries and exits, *The Poet* tells the story of the ideal woman artist's manifestation on earth over time. Scene One takes place in a classical Greek setting and describes the development of a poet as public seer and priestess by Spirits of Genius, Poesy, and Beauty (as well as assorted Naiads and Fairies). This figure, named only as Poet, is likely modelled on Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi and Priestess of Apollo, who was said to deliver divine prophecies inspired by gases rising from Mount Parnassus. Scenes Two through Four take

place in the present day (for Sprague's contemporary readers), where the content of Scene One appears as a book of poetry titled *The True Life*, written by a local trance medium speaker known initially as the Improvisatrice. In Scene Two, set in the comfortable parlor of the Seymour family, *The True Life*'s ideas on women's public art are a topic of discussion for the parents, their daughter Ida, and family friend Henry Bruce, all of whom support its principles and look forward to seeing the Improvisatrice perform. Scene Three takes us to the public hall for the lecture, which leaves the group convinced of spirit influence and reassured of the propriety and value of women as public speakers and moral leaders. Finally, Scene Four returns us to the Seymour home, which is visited by the Improvisatrice (now known as Miss Raymond), who tells of her plan to establish a meeting place where she will deliver inspirational messages to those in need. Ida's parents learn that she has been writing poetry under the name Cora Lee and is so inspired and emboldened by Miss Raymond's example that she can now admit it. Bruce, similarly inspired by Miss Raymond's words, reveals his plans to marry Ida.

Although offering an idealized vision of her own career as poet and speaker, particularly through the character of Miss Raymond, *The Poet* places the mid-century trance medium within a larger, grander history of the woman artist, and her continuing quest to give hope to humanity. It also suggests that Ida represents the "future" woman artist, who is encouraged and respected in her efforts and relies on her own diligence and talent rather than direct spirit influence. Throughout *The Poet*, Sprague puts the strongest statements in support of women's equality and artistry in the mouths of male characters. This works both to protect the modesty of Miss Raymond and Ida and to give their words and presence a social power that they cannot claim for themselves. This dramatic device, perhaps more powerfully than any explicit statement from Sprague, illustrates the utility of inspired ventriloquism as a means of rhetorical power for

women. Where she speaks for divinity in performance, in writing she is "spoken for" by male supporters.

In poetry as well as on the stage, Sprague performatively assumes an identity free of boundaries and thus a power to see, speak, and act outside of restrictive social and political constructions. Claiming to speak for immanence rather than herself, she positions herself to assume public roles which would otherwise be closed to her. Mediumship, Victoria Stewart argues, can help facilitate the assessment of one's subject position, as well as "help the individual situate him or herself in relation to national (or international) historical events" (10). As reform speaker and Civil War poet, Sprague encourages audiences to share her vision and, in response, take steps to promote values of equality and justice through support of women's rights, abolition, and the war itself. Spiritualist faith in eternal progress spoke to American confidence in its own destiny as the "light of the world," particularly during the Civil War, when its own future seemed most in doubt. Bret Carroll notes that 1848, the year when spirit rapping emerged in Rochester, also marked the death of John Quincy Adams, considered by many Americans of the period as the last major representative of the founding generation (3). American Spiritualists look back to a revered past as much as they look ahead to a promised future, and understand the present day as the essential link between national memory and destiny. By manifesting this power before their eyes, Sprague encourages audiences to materialize thought in action to effect an intentional future – to "act out" as she does.

Mediumship, Christianity, and the Art of Belief

> *"From thy lips strange words prophetic / Half unconsciously shall flow"*
> The Poet*, 23*

As a popular religion, Spiritualism represents a domestication and feminization of Christian practice, but does not present a serious challenge to its overall belief system. The trance medium claims to manifest the voices of heaven on earth, a view consistent with (if elaborating) the narrative of Christian salvation. During the 1840s, Ann Taves notes, the term "trance" was used interchangeably with "ecstasy," the traditional Christian term for visionary experience (*ekstasis*), but soon overtook the older term, as it conveyed "growing scientific legitimacy and popular resonance" (180).[9] Equating primitive Christianity with modern Spiritualism, practitioners argued that biblical "angels" were the same as Spiritualist "spirits" (Taves 181). Women's domestic responsibilities overseeing sickness and death, along with innate capacities for sympathy and selflessness, seemed to qualify them for the task of spirit messaging. As Ann Braude points out, "Death literally occurred in woman's sphere. Most people died at home, attended by female relatives" (53). The centrality of women (and of the dead) to Spiritualism means that, in Braude's words, it "reflected the Victorian view that the home was the true locus of religiosity" (24). The popularity of private séances and spirit "circles" in the period, as well as the diversity of audiences seeking such entertainments, indicates the movement's resonance with period concerns. Even Mary Todd Lincoln believed she spoke with her dead son, Willie, and had mediums to the White House to conduct séances for cabinet members and senators. As W.D. King points out, the medium "functioned entirely in cooperation with the (objectifying) system, offering innocuous repetitions of the comforting words of the dead, words that usually convey no transgressive or subversive significance" (201). Sprague's representation of spirit messaging in *The Poet*, through the character of medium Miss Raymond, reflects this, as she offers four short (and very general) visions of spirits – a child, a young girl, a mother, and a bride – all female and all identified as familial figures (125). This display is

appropriately powerful, leaving "A hush in the audience: many in tears" (125). While for many mediums the spirit message is her whole display, as it undoubtedly was the draw for most spectators, Sprague utilizes the emotion it generates (as well as the assurance it gives of her conventional femininity and Christianity) to engage audiences in other parts of her discourse.

Sprague theorizes the potential religious power of women by contrasting mediumship with the cold didacticism and formalism of sermonic oratory. The essential element that a woman brings to religious instruction is femininity, a quality seen to connect her more directly with both the spiritual source and her receiving audience. Rather than constituting a challenge to traditional Christian belief, Sprague suggests that the Spiritualist medium simply manifests the forces the minister and priest only speculate on. As Sprague (through the character of Mr. Seymour) describes it in *The Poet*,

> No voice like hers to man was ever given,
> To speak of hope, or point the soul to heaven.
> And who can better teach of God above,
> Than she who has a higher sense of love
> Than man can know; in whose aspiring soul
> Devotion in its richest anthems roll? (72)

The verbs used – speak, point, teach – highlight her active role in giving strength to others' aspirations for some higher and better purpose than themselves. Sprague's choice of a male character to explain women's verbal power, above, helps to illustrate that she is not challenging conventional gender roles or sentimental ideology, only seeking to expand her audience. The woman artist is "naturally" a spiritual medium, Mr. Seymour argues, so has only to display this condition in order to encourage audiences themselves to Spiritualist belief. Spiritualist women, according to Alex Owen, "became the embodiment of the Evangelical ideal;" as a medium of intercourse with heaven, she was a repository of religious principle (10). Henry Bruce in *The Poet* (who often speaks on behalf of Miss Raymond) more pointedly suggests the medium's role

as a public performer: "The Stage, – though much it panders to man's lust / … rightly managed, 'twould prove mightier power / Than e'en the pulpit, in the present hour" (86). Assuming the stage as a trance medium, the woman does God's work on earth.

Sprague came to her vision of mediumship as productive religious performance while bedridden and bereft, nearly four years away from her eventual "cure."[10] Sprague's diary of 19 July 1850 records her reflection on a discussion regarding "whether spirits could communicate with mortals," prompting her to write a poem titled "To my Mother's Spirit." This is her first explicit reference to Spiritualist belief and it signals a new focus and use for her writing. She makes a striking distinction between *truth*, which will ultimately prove itself in reality, and an *idea*, which gives someone the hope that spirit communication might be real:

> 'Tis a beautiful idea, that our departed friends are around us and with us, that they can come back to guard us from temptation, to soothe us in affliction and win us from sin. 'Tis a beautiful idea, but if true, *could* the world be so sunk in wickedness? Yet if not true it might be still working and I am inclined to think it may be so. Is it not their influence when better thoughts to the heart come back which had almost yielded to sin? (147)

The "their" of the final line is somewhat ambiguous – does it refer to the "departed friends" (actualized as spirit voices) or the "beautiful idea" (as belief)? Either way, Sprague argues, the influence is real and positive. Susan Grant notes that in this passage Sprague argues only "for possibility, an argument not dependent on an assumed truth but rather dependent on an assumption which will provide action/productivity through a mental/cognitive shift in perception" (71). While the belief itself is not necessarily "true," in that it may not ultimately be proven that spirits guide the living from beyond the grave, the belief itself "might still be working" and have some positive effect on its bearer. She resolves to "make real" the comforting thought of spiritual intercourse and improvement by embodying it on stage. Sprague decides that mediumship both pleases and works (and perhaps works *because* it pleases).

Spiritualist leader Andrew Jackson Davis also argues that audience gratification stimulates belief and suggests utilizing music, lighting, and props in "spirit circles" for the benefit of live participants; such theatrics "will entertain, and amuse, and at last, perhaps develop their mental powers" (98). A similar view informs the work of mesmeric healers who, in response to criticism from the medical community for their unconventional methods, suggest that mesmerism is closer to an art than a science: "Perhaps it is a fact like love is a fact. It cannot be proved but it serves" (qtd. in Stewart 295).[11] Sprague argues that belief "works" as a positive influence because it gives shape, meaning, and direction to present lives through the idea of an enduring past and a certain future. As Miss Raymond describes it in *The Poet*, hopeful thoughts have real consequences: "For though *ideals* in the present day, / They shall be *reals* yet, and bear the sway" (37). A similar sentiment is offered by Fuller when she advises American women, "Cherish your best hopes as a faith, and abide by them in action" (105). Sprague realizes that belief is an art, a process and product requiring skill and technique in order to achieve it. The medium – part actress and part minister – encourages belief by acting it out.

One of the faults of traditional sermonic oratory, in Sprague's view, is its assumption that religious audiences need not be moved or convinced, only instructed. After attending Christmas Eve services at an Episcopal church, Sprague's journal of 24 December 1855 records her disappointment. While praising the tasteful decorations and lighting, she dislikes the service itself: "the forms & ceremonies seemed so without soul to me that I could not sympathise [sic] at all in the services" (157). With its teachings "so little aligned to original thought," she doubts it can "feed the mind & answer its aspirations" better than her own Spiritualist belief. Her first (and likely last) organized religious service leaves her with an "unsatisfied feeling in the soul" (158).[12] In *The Poet*, Henry Bruce also criticizes priests who "chain the mind" with old rules and

stories, narrating cold facts instead of fresh truths and ideas. He contrasts the ineffective pulpit with the thrilling stage:

> While life and inspiration have been caught
> By the true Actor; he, the facts, the men,
> In voice, and look, and action, lives again.
> The preacher carves the statue cold and still,
> The actor with the living soul can fill. (86)

Bruce prefers the "life" and "action" of theatrical performance to the cold, unmoved (and unmoving) "statue" of sermonic oratory:

> One hangs a glowing picture on the wall,
> The other, with true genius in his call,
> Shall bid the figures from the canvas start,
> And step forth men, with living brain and heart,
> To thrill through eye and ear, and reach the soul,
> Until he triumphs, victor o'er the whole. (86)

The dynamic "call" of an impassioned voice compares favorably with the static picture hung on a wall for view. Live action inspires viewers in a way that framed art never could:

> If men would act the Christ on this same Stage, -
> His life as pictured on the written page, -
> And throw a truthfulness in every word,
> As Booth stood forth, another 'Richard Third,'
> 'Twould take such hold upon the gazing heart,
> As seldom comes from any preacher's art. (86)

Theater could be improved with a godly message, and preaching could be improved with theatrical embodiment and live performance:

> Like Christ, the earnest actor then should stand,
> With blood-stains in his side, and foot, and hand;
> And in his power, the scene long passed away,
> Should be enacted in the present day;
> Till unbelieving Thomas, rapt, should cry,
> 'I do believe – like thee I'll live – thou'rt nigh.' (87)

God seems nearer in performance than in sermon because his principles come alive before audiences on stage, allowing them to see, hear, and feel his power rather than merely meditate

over it. The ability to make a story come to life, to persuade even the "doubting Thomas" of its truth, is the actor's gift. Bruce claims there have been preachers with "this thrilling art," and that if men like these would "tread this degraded Stage, / And reenact what's called the Sacred Page . . . The Drama in the dust no more would lie; / But from the chains of vice and sin be free, / And upward spring to native purity" (87-88). Once again championed by a male voice, the Spiritualist medium promises to redeem Christian practice and theatrical space at once.

Sprague also associates the traditional sermon and related liturgy with a regrettable focus on reverential ceremony to the exclusion of soulful engagement. In "The Ruined Church," the speaker walks through the ruins of a "dying church" (clearly a figure for a creed no longer relevant or "working" for its members), reflecting that its ruined form actually improves it by making it more open and accessible. With broken windows, missing doors, and an open roof, all who want to worship are welcome, proving that the church is "progressing even in decay" (19). There are no silent worshippers in the pews now, only birds and other animals, and local children using it as a playground, which Sprague claims is a better use of the space, with new and fresh life replacing the old and tired forms. She contrasts the children's voices with the previous parishoners' silence as she watches: "All unbaptized, some fresh from God's own hand, / Who played and sported where *they* knelt in prayer" (47-48). These children are more like angels than the "saints from those old days gone by," with the children's "music" replacing the "kneeling homage" of earlier days (50, 56, 55). There is, she reflects:

> No sermon like their joyous, happy face,
> Their trust in all that comes, and is to come;
> Their perfect love and absence of all doubt,
> Strike sceptic [sic], priest, and pope, alike as dumb (57-60)

While the children live out their hope and innocence, the believers merely march back to God with "theologic art" (64). Like the children's living music, the birds – "Heaven's choir" – also

offer a song, making "the ruin with its echo ring" (68, 70). Sprague's "The Real Prayer" offers a related statement, comparing the static icons central to Catholic practice and faith – "Devotion's form without the soul" – with the silent parishioners in the pews (31). Similar views of organized religion in the period are expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson, among others.[13] Only lived belief, such as that modelled by the trance medium, will sustain a faith and its followers, Sprague argues.

The strongest argument for woman's suitability as religious leader and public teacher is her unquestionably powerful (and potentially dangerous) influence. Given her unavoidable influence, woman must teach and preach in order to use her power for good rather than evil. Sprague's use of Eve as the cultural symbol for feminine influence follows other woman orators, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth, as well as Fuller. (Coincidentally, all three were, to different degrees, believers in Spiritualism.) In her July 1848 Address to the Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, Stanton states that "as in woman all have fallen, so in her elevation shall the race be recreated" (352). Truth's Speech to the Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (May 1851) references Eve as well: "if de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder ought to be able to turn it back and git it right side up again" (525). For her part, Fuller argues that the time is right for women to use the position relegated to them as descendants of Eve to realize new powers: hearing again and again that "through woman man was lost, so through woman must man be redeemed, the time must be at hand" (92). Utilizing the repetitive discourse to empower rather than pacify, Fuller charges women to "do something to lift off the curse incurred by Eve" (98). In *The Poet*, Sprague gives the following lines to Mrs. Seymour (one of only five

times she speaks in the poem) to vocalize agreement with her husband's support of public speaking women:

> And to redeem her wrong, she ought to teach.
> This proves undoubtedly her right to preach.
> If she was the first to drag Man from the skies,
> Now, let her tempt his soul again to the rise. (73)

Mrs. Seymour delivers these lines "smiling," and they are received by Clifton, who does not support women's equality, as the finest statement in support of the cause: "I'm forced to yield, / Not to thy husband, but thyself the field" (73). Women can appeal to unthinking men only through their own vanity, as this exchange shows through its gentle, humorous treatment of a complex rhetorical issue. Each of these women playfully suggests the moral superiority of women who wield such power over their male superiors, helping to illustrate the paradoxical social empowerment not of women, precisely, but a cultural idea of womanhood furthered by men.

Sprague suggests that women's spiritual nature makes them superior not only as religious leaders, but as verbal artists. Modeling God's own power and purpose, the woman artist as medium does his work here on earth. The idea of a "Living Poem" is repeated throughout Sprague's poetry, representing the world as a text written by God, which the believer reads and eventually contributes to through her own life's "writing." The world as a book is a figure used to make visible the spirit world here on earth. In *The Poet*, during the classical poet's development as a priestess, spirit guides reveal a new truth, a fresh vision of the world around her: "a Living Book / Unclasped, unsealed for me to read this hour . . . 'Tis one grand Poem: in my soul I see / Line and line unfold and speak to me" (12). The fact that she pictures this truth as a written record she can read and that even "speaks" to her, helps to frame Sprague's own work as poet within the same narrative of progress. Compared with the works of "earth's poets" she

has read, with "thought by thought conned o'er" (to no productive end beyond thought itself), here is "A living Poem written by God's hand" (13). While earth's poets can only speak of their own time and place, God's poem is forever-present. She now reads her world like a text, it "opens like a scroll to meet my view; / I see God's finger writing something new. / E'en as I gaze, still line on line is given" (13). God's text reveals itself in lived performance: "Why, everything's a song, and sings its soul / In its true life; the parts but make the whole." (13). The poet admits her own ambition, telling God, "I cannot check the wish to be like Thee!" Her aspiration is fueled rather than extinguished by God's example, however, and she resolves to use her gift of words, her verbal art, to "speak" for God on earth. The Spirits remind her of the goal: "Thou singest not to burst from earth all free / But to teach others how to sing like thee" (36). The artist is closest to God when she is most like him, doing his work (though on a smaller, human scale).

The preacher never envies God's power, he only seeks to explain it – this makes the artist a better teacher of God's ways because she models his "living poem" through her own. Rather than merely derivative, the medium's modeling of God's power places her work in line with his. Barrett Browning similarly positions Aurora Leigh to claim divinity as poet when Aurora writes: "Art's the witness of what Is / Behind this show. If the world's show were all, / Then imitation would be all in Art" (VII.834-836). In her journal of 1856, after a visit to the Academy of Fine Arts in Providence, Sprague contemplates her love of both nature and art: "They are alike, only God made one in his Infinite Power, & breathed into it a life, while man makes the other with a finite mind – a copyist from the Great Artist" (183). As medium and as verbal artist, Sprague knows God to be her artistic father: "I am thy child, O Artist grand!" (*The Poet* 21). Directed by spirits to make their message known to the public, the priestess is told, "Thou shalt be thyself a

Poem" (25). As Eliza Richards argues, "Spiritualist poetry served contradictorily as both a telegraphic medium to bring heaven to its readers and writers, and a physical medium in which to create that place" (*Gender* 119). The trance medium as verbal artist is not merely a channel for divine creativity, but a creative force herself.

Presenting herself as directly inspired by a higher power, Sprague aims to *be* that higher power for her audiences' emulation, and for that reason, she cannot simply claim to be a passive vessel for spirit communication. When, in *The Poet*, an audience member accuses Miss Raymond of blasphemy for claiming to speak with "Nature's voice" through powers given by God through "the saints in Heaven," she responds to his charge with a surprising acknowledgment of personal ambition and agency:

> Then am I infidel! For I have sought,
> E'en from a child, to win from Heaven a voice:
> And now I've heard, my friends, with me rejoice!
> And learn that all at last may see and know
> Heaven's brighter joys, though living here below. (124)

Though her statement is tempered by the suggestion that *all* may see and know, she does admit to seeking first the power of "a voice" for herself. She speaks of her artistry as an answer to a prayer (one most have shared) to better understand the ways of heaven and the world. Importantly, this most striking of statements is immediately followed by the most selfless (performatively speaking) portion of her lecture, where she speaks to and for the spirits of the newly dead in Heaven, as detailed earlier. Highlighting her own idealized feminine passivity, the spirits she communes with – a baby ("sweet darling of the mother's heart), a "fair maiden," "loved mother," and "young bride" – are all female and their voices and hers converge to urge listeners and readers to "say that God is great, / That He has opened Heaven's gate!" (125). The woman artist's statement of personal desire is thus carefully followed by a powerful appeal to the

values of domesticity and motherhood. If a public role provides women with power, it also requires them to utilize it only to serve the existing structures of sentimental ideology and Christianity.

While Sprague's verbal art shares similar goals with preaching – both giving didactic instruction for moral improvement and spiritual conversion – mediumship works through embodiment and exchange rather than narration and indoctrination. Theater provides Sprague the model for a new kind of religious teaching that engages and inspires audiences through "living poems" rather than rote recitation and cold dogma. As a public teacher, the female medium does not speak to or for others, but is "spoken through" (Hendler 139). From contemporary discourses on women's art and influence – sentimental, reform, and evangelical – she borrows the idea that the creation and maintenance of belief is an art especially suited to women's talents. However, it is an art form that requires careful discipline and diligence to balance the demands of audiences and critics with the desires of the artist herself.

Social Reform, Speaking Women, and the Public Stage

"I shall have a very cold ride to Williston this afternoon, but as I am public property I must go"
Sprague's journal, 6 January 1856

Like other mid-century women writers and speakers, Sprague contextualizes her public work within the contemporary atmosphere of reform, linking the increased vocalization of enlightened sentiments with their eventual manifestation in action. Fuller famously claimed that "never were lungs so puffed with the wind of declamation" as in mid-century America (14). She believes progress is inevitable, as "with so much talk about virtue and freedom, must be mingled some desire for them" (15). Sojourner Truth's speech in Akron, Ohio, cited earlier, also prophesies action as a result of discontent: "whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out

o'kilter" (524). Sprague's optimism may be seen in her journal of 24 March 1856, where she records her desire to speak in the state's prisons and her plan to bring it about: "The more it is agitated, the more it is brought before the public, the sooner the time will arrive when I shall be able to accomplish this thing" (167). (Though she expected to wait much longer for permission, Sprague actually spoke at both the Massachusetts Women's and Men's prisons in June of that year.) As noted in M.E.G.'s Introduction to *The Poet*, Sprague's "sympathies widened year by year, and her mind liberalized as she came into contact with the world . . . Her discourses, while losing nothing of their former spirit, grew more direct and practical in their character, as from a broader observation she studied the actual condition of society and its deepest needs" (xviii-xix). With more than two hundred trance speakers active during the 1850s and 1860s, Spiritualist mediums formed the first large group of American women to speak in public, even outnumbering reform speakers by the end of the 1850s (Braude xix, 91).

Unlike radical reform speakers, inspirational speakers qualified for the public platform not by experience or credentials but "by innocence, ignorance, and youth" (Braude 85). The performance of conventional femininity required of the trance medium persona, emphasizing these qualities, becomes an essential element of her rhetorical power. Sprague both establishes her credibility and promotes reform, not by arguing directly for it, but by suggesting the inevitability of progress and the self-evident nature of audiences' responsibilities to it. Consistent with expectations for feminine intuition as a source of knowledge, she is not demanding or advising change but predicting it.

Often referred to by contemporaries as "the Preaching Woman," Sprague herself preferred "Public Speaking Medium," a label that highlights service rather than any specific political message or gendered identity. Sprague chose to use her skills as a medium to vocalize

spirit messages in public, rather than run spirit circles or séances in private homes. As an itinerant lecturer, she travelled when and where the spirits directed her, normally giving three to six performances per week. She spoke every other Sunday in South Reading, Vermont, and scheduled other engagements around this commitment. Sprague was a very popular speaker, receiving fifty-seven invitations to speak in 1858, seventy-one in 1859, and eighty-eight in 1860 (Braude 106). While she gives few details from the lectures themselves in her journal, aside from the size and relative responsiveness of audiences, she does provide useful commentary on other lecturers and writers, which helps to shape a view of her own rhetorical strategies. *The Poet*, while offering an idealized version of the trance lecturer (leaving all rhetorical and theatrical strategizing to the Spirits), also reveals Sprague's keen interest in theatrical staging, music, audience participation, and use of props. In representations of performance practice in her writing, we can see Sprague moving toward a more secular women's art, one better able to address specific social ills and inspire needed reforms. The woman artist evolves over the course of *The Poet*, too, from a classical figure talking with Fairies of the Greenwood in "a thickly shaded bower in the forest" to a determined organizer of a women's shelter located (note the specificity) on Oxford Street (37, 166). Looking first to Sprague's own performance practice and then to her idealized representation of the woman artist in *The Poet*, we can more fully understand the challenging conditions faced by women on the public speaking stage.

We can piece together an idea of Sprague's performance practices from reviews and biographical sketches. Sprague's performances typically began with a musical prelude performed on melodeon, followed by a hymn, during which she would appear on stage, take a seat, and as mentioned above, proceed to wash her hands and face with make-believe soap and water. At the end of the hymn, she often took its theme as subject for the extemporaneous verse lecture that

followed. Topics covered in lectures included the music of nature, the interior and exterior conditions of our being, and the truth as object of investigation. Reviews and sketches describe a three-part performance – song, lecture, poem – typically lasting around an hour and a half, with all sections purported to be conveyed, at least in part, through the spirits, while the medium is in a trance state. Because of its metrical and figurative aspects, as Richards points out, poetry itself suggests a telegraphic quality with its seeming "transcendence of earthly language" (*Gender* 119); spoken poetry heightens this effect. While most reviewers acknowledge Sprague's eloquent delivery, fine singing, and able poetry, a number question the veracity of her claims of spirit influence. A review from the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* of 13 March 1860 harshly pronounces it "the same pointless collection of beautiful abstractions which it has ever been our misfortune to listen to when Trance Speaking was announced" and, more succinctly, "profound twaddle from beginning to end" ("City"). Seemingly unmoved by attacks on her delivery, appearance, or even the issue of spirit influence, Sprague was far more troubled by critics, like the one above, who questioned the applicability and utility of her message to real-world problems.

The central feature of Sprague's lectures allows audience members to suggest the topic for her verse lecture or recitation, a device commonly utilized by inspirational speakers. Because the subject is introduced on-the-spot, by a stranger, it gives weight to the claim that her lecture is truly inspired. Without the presence of an expectant audience, the effect of improvisation would be lost. As Bruce in *The Poet* tells us, the "charm of every Improvisatrice" is the *impression* that her words come "fresh from out the mint / [o]f mind, just newly-coined" (108-9). Whether the words are divinely inspired or the themes simply allow her to appear an improviser, the effect "sends the words home with such burning power, / [t]hey sway thee at their will" (108). De

Stäel's Corinne (who does not expressly claim spirit guidance, but presents herself simply as an Improvisatrice) similarly explains that her "inspiration" for impromptu song is the performance dynamic itself: "Mine enthusiasm, then, seems supernatural: a spirit speaks within me far greater than mine own . . ." (37). She does not aim to deceive her audience, but the effect of their rapt presence fuels her own "enthusiasm." While the source of her words is not supernatural, neither is it limited to her own isolated consciousness; consistent with the mediumistic aesthetic, it is a collectively produced effect, "like animated converse" (36). Corinne claims that a "single sneer" would banish her improvisational skill, which cannot bear unbelief and requires open-mindedness (36). A similar sentiment is suggested by Sprague in her journals, when she distinguishes between "open" and "unharmonious" or "sectarian" audiences, and how the latter negatively impact a given night's performance. As she describes it relative to spirit circles, the spirits are less apt to "give" when participants are skeptical or unresponsive: in such cases she records, "we succeeded in getting very little from the Spirits" (151). The open flow of two-way communication is essential to the successful performance environment and to the mediumistic aesthetic, as a whole. In *The Poet*, Miss Raymond's recitations are repeatedly interrupted by voices from the audience who ask her to expand upon or clarify different points. The speaker is unfazed by these interruptions, and indeed seems to be encouraged by them, as they focus the audience's attention on her discourse.

There is no distinction, Sprague claims, between the inspiration flowing from spirits, from other artists, from audiences in performance, or from her own interpretation or experience of those forces – her job is simply to communicate the power to others, not to parse out ownership or credit. While under spiritual influence, John Buescher argues, facts "operate as magnets . . . attracting bits and pieces of language," resulting in a method that resembles

"constructing a piece of sculpture using found objects" (117). Richards refers to this derivative quality of Spiritualist works as "lyric mimicry," explaining that it is not a failure of originality but rather a valuing of repetition and transmission in its place; the medium's is a "collaborative aesthetic" rather than a solitary one ("Lyric" 270, 278). This speaks directly to another frequent criticism of Sprague's lectures, the accusation of plagiarism. The disgruntled Milwaukee reviewer quoted earlier accuses Sprague of speaking like "a boarding school Miss," with "the fervent flow of stolen poetry" sprinkled throughout her supposedly "inspired" and original outpouring ("City"). As de Stäel's Corinne explains, she also uses others' poetry in her performances: "Sometimes I quote the most applicable passages from the poets of other lands. Those divine apostrophes are mine, while my soul is filled by their import" (37). Though Sprague does not discuss her use of others' works in lecture, the mediumistic aesthetic would consider such appropriations acceptable.

The "spectacle quality" of women's oratory predominated in the antebellum era, and Sprague subtly admits to capitalizing on this sensation as a means of greater influence (Gustafson 42). "Inspiration discourses" like Sprague's were not especially innovative in content, Alex Owen argues, but instead "[i]t was the woman's presence, a combination of the theatrical and spiritual, which held an audience rapt for hours" (211). Because the female performer was a relatively new arrival on the public scene in the mid-century, she enjoyed an enviable popularity arising from, in the words of *The Ladies Repository* of March 1860, her unique "hold upon the heart and sympathy of the American public" ("Literary"). The audience member's initial skepticism actually enhances the impact of her performance, as the sight and sound of abstracted, idealized womanhood is projected through an actual woman's body and voice. In *The Poet*, Bruce initially refers to Miss Raymond by the mysterious name "the

Improvisatrice," and even when reassured of her respectability by his friend Mr. Bell, he still considers her an enigma. Similarly, de Staël's narrator says that Corinne is both "mystery and publicity, united in the fate of a female of whom every one spoke, yet whose real name no one knew" (17). The public speaking woman is a subject of speculation, intrigue, and rumor. After hearing Miss Raymond speak on stage for the first time, all three of the Seymours are determined "to see her" privately, as if to confirm that she is, in fact, real (147). Miss Raymond later counsels Ida that the public woman must accept and endure the abstracting gaze of public adoration and criticism alike.

Reviews and biographical sketches of mid-century woman speakers were concerned more with her display of a reassuring femininity than the specific cause she championed. By displaying, in Nan Johnson's words, "an irresistible combination of the best qualities of the white Christian woman: noble, maidenly, and soft-spoken," the speaker might secure rhetorical power (110). Caroline Levander also notes that most representations of woman speakers, both fictional and critical, emphasize the public's response to them, "which depends less on the speakers' specific politics than on the political implications of their physical intrusion into a supposedly male arena" (14). *The Poet*'s priestess is told by the spirits, as they set her on a course of public speaking, to remain "in the world, and yet not of it" (24). In a similar tone, Miss Raymond advises Ida, as she welcomes her "to the field":

> Let it be done with quiet, gentle grace;
> But firm, unfearing, as the rock that stands
> Where ocean-waves clutch at it with their hands. (174)

Gender appropriately, it is her selfless purpose, not herself, which will make her strong. A similar determination is recorded in Sprague's journals but more telling, perhaps, are two spirit messages left in Sprague's handwriting, encouraging her to continue public work despite her

personal ambivalence toward it. Braude argues that they "provide eloquent testimony that internalized conventions presented obstacles to the expansion of women's public role as difficult to overcome as external prejudices or restrictions" (115). Balancing the needs of audiences and criticism of skeptics with her own personal desires, goals, and values, Sprague repeatedly admonishes herself for lapses of strength or resolve.

Antebellum Americans equated the perceived physical beauty of the speaker with the value of her expression, believing that "attractive features provid[e] expression's purest medium. Only a lovely face reveal[s] the soul" (Gustafson 48). Even Fuller famously comments that intellectual women should occupy the speaker's platform "if not unsufferably ugly and slovenly" (27). As a vehicle for spirit, the beautiful body artlessly and effortlessly expresses soul, while coarse features present "a physical opacity that thicken[s] and obscure[s] sense" (Gustafson 49). After seeing Miss Raymond perform in *The Poet*, Bruce claims it was like witnessing an angel: "Her look and manner were too great, too high, - / If false at all, she was *herself* a lie" (81). Unlike reform women, trance speakers did not dress as Quakers. The public appearance of colorfully-dressed, young, female mediums, while providing "potent material" for the male imagination, "did not conflict with the passivity believed to characterize female sexuality because they were understood to be unconscious" (Braude 108). A number of audience members in *The Poet* comment upon Miss Raymond's dress, with one Gentleman saying, "Now I admired her dress – so little show," but then admitting that it was the "strange glow / That lit her features when she turned to sing" that really captured his attention (146). To his mind, her simple, unadorned style of dress only accentuates the effect of natural, unpracticed inspiration.

Where physical beauty enhances the woman speaker's message, a less attractive appearance may detract from it. Our old friend from the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* finds

Sprague's attention to earthly matters both "sensualist" and "sentimental." Worse still, she lacks the one quality that might justify such a large audience: physical beauty.

> She is not by any means a prepossessing lady. Her 'human face divine' promised us no superior intellectual treat. We thought she was haggard, as though the 'trance state' in which she passes a part of her existence, was not congenial with the corporeal system; and we were disappointed at the outset, for we knew that the magic of a woman's tongue is scarcely effective with a mixed audience, unless there is the important adjunct of personal beauty. ("City")

Bruce, too, is concerned about the physical effects of publicity on Miss Raymond. Upon seeing her off-stage at the Seymour's, he is relieved to find her looking well: "'Tis a real treat, / Once more in quiet place thy face to meet. / I feared to see thee looking pale and thin; / I'm thankful 'tis not so" (165). Such appearance would both detract from her effect on audiences and confirm conservative fears about women's proper sphere. Despite the critic's opinion about her lack of beauty, Sprague did have a large group of male admirers; she received five proposals of marriage by mail, three within one two-week period (Braude 110). (Her brother-in-law was greatly distressed when she accepted none of them.) According to Braude, "The trance speaker's anomalous independence freed men from conventions governing their interaction with women just as it freed women to address mixed audiences" (107). Marriage proposals from strangers were common for public speaking women and perhaps even more so for mediums, since the trance state highlighted women's vulnerability and encouraged male audience members to either take advantage of, or protect her from, this weakened state.

While acknowledging in poems the public's preoccupation with the woman speaker's physical appearance, Sprague's journals reveal her careful attention to argumentation and delivery. Sprague's reflections on other lecturers, especially, show that she understood public speaking as a rhetorical mode, requiring skill and practice, not just something "transmitted" in perfect form by the spirits. After reading a lecture on "Free Love as a doctrine of Spiritualism" –

a view she does not agree with, but from a writer she generally respects and enjoys reading – Sprague suggests how he might make his argument more palatable and persuasive to audiences: "If Nichols['s] ideas of 'Free Love' are pure & Godlike, he knows very well that the world will not understand & appreciate them as such, therefore it seems to me that he ought to be more definite & explicit in his definitions & use of terms" (166). Offering rhetorical advice to a fellow writer with whom she disagrees, Sprague's belief in the free and vital exchange of ideas seems as important as, if not more than, a firm commitment to one's "side" of the debate. This generous attitude extends even to opponents of Spiritualism, as evidenced in her journal of 12 April 1855, which records her diplomatic review of a Unitarian Minister preaching against Spiritualism: "But he treated the subject very fairly for one so much opposed & he gave a very able lecture. The arguments were nothing to me . . ." (171). She can appreciate his oratorical skill without either being insulted or shaken by his arguments.

At the same time, Sprague can be critical of speakers both within and opposed to the movement, demonstrating a keen observation of others' rhetorical practices, as well as a competitive streak. She criticizes a lecture given by a Professor Harris on behalf of the Mission of Public Medium in her journal dated 27 November 1855. While acknowledging his learning and prestige, she finds fault with his presentation on that very account. With an intellect "grown gray in its study [he] lacked that style of delivery so necessary to enchain an audience, & even the Spiritualist thought the matter was very poorly discussed, & the Philosophy held up in no enviable state for exhibition" (154). Those who have already made a public name for themselves in business or science, she believes, "make not half as good actors, either as Lecturers or as practical doers, as many who have been less known in the world . . . it seems impossible to

reduce this thing to merely a doctrine" (154). The performance dynamic and related theatrics, she believes, are essential to the message's power and influence.

Sprague's position as trance medium lecturer, rather than radical reformer, allows her to disguise any rhetorical strategizing or competitive nature, as evidenced in her journal of 30 May 1857. When Sprague's lecture immediately follows one by a Rev. Dr. Dwight, who is lecturing against Spiritualism, she engages in an active (if unconscious) debate:

> I went to hear him & in the evening when I lectured, the same text was taken by Spirits through myself, & I spoke for an hour & a half taking up point after point, as those said who heard *both* discourses & refuting them. Dr. Dwight was to repeat his lecture, but when he heard that the Spirits were again to answer it through me, & that I was to be publicly advertised that that was to be the case, he put *off* its repetition until after I left. Very cowardly I thought, & so thought many others. (181)

Unable or unwilling to engage directly in a public debate with a male social superior (both a Reverend and a Doctor), she presents herself – in writing, as in person – as merely a vessel for the exchange of ideas. Such liminality strengthens her confidence and resolve, rather than eroding it. Mediumship allows Sprague to speak and write publicly, even (and perhaps especially) when she cannot claim the words as her own.

The lecture given by Miss Raymond in *The Poet* differs from Sprague's in several key respects, and these differences demonstrate the writer's idealized view of women's art in practice. In writing, she improves upon and perfects the presentation of the trance lecturer through theatrical techniques, but also carefully disguises any rhetorical strategizing behind Spirit Influence. Sprague's three-part scheme is replaced by Miss Raymond's six-part presentation (prayer, song, recitation, invocation, recitation, song). All are presented in verse form, though each utilizes a different rhyme scheme and meter. Miss Raymond does not employ the "washing of hands" to indicate her turning away from earthly concerns in order to engage the

spirits; she instead relies on a performative rejection of the audience itself. Miss Raymond's opening song is distinctly a prayer, a private exchange with God in which she denies any interest in the crowd's approval or public fame. The only time she looks directly at the audience, in fact, is when she speaks in response to their questions during the recitation. Miss Raymond also utilizes a harp during performances to signal to the audience her moments of divine inspiration. The stage directions tell us, "She leans over the harp a few moments, then raising her eyes toward heaven, touches the strings and commences singing" (114). The prop-enhanced distinction she makes between moments of inspired improvisation and her own words helps to support the claim of spirit guidance. De Staël's Corinne explains that her own use of the lyre on stage "helps to complete the effect which flies from the control of words" (37). The use of an instrument as a stage prop also enhances the impression of a classical singer/prophetess, helping to raise the woman performer from material to ethereal, while also capitalizing on the period's idealization of music as sublime expression.

Rather than directly addressing reform issues in Miss Raymond's trance lecture, Sprague more subtly stages debates over women's rights in the domestic safety of the Seymour's parlor, where the strongest arguments in support of equality are voiced by men. When female characters do address such issues, they argue from their own experience, rather than any political theory of natural rights. The last time we see Miss Raymond, she is asking Bruce for help in establishing a charity house for lost souls where she "will go and improvise in song, / And speak to them of all their sin and wrong, / And give such words as come to me each hour" (167). She hopes to reach women, especially: "To save but one suffering Magdalen, / Were better than applause for tongue or pen" (167). Fuller also calls upon women to take care of women, writing, "Seek out these degraded women, give them tender sympathy, counsel, employment. Take the place of mothers,

such as might have saved them originally" (167). Miss Raymond next launches into a lengthy diatribe on men as tempters and hypocrites, particularly "men of wealth, of power, and fame, / And even civil power" (168). Echoing Fuller's argument that "union is only possible to those who are units" (71), she declares: "Then only, when we have pure-minded men, / Shall woman shine like stars amid the heaven" (170). Miss Raymond then expresses her wish to remain unmarried (like Sprague). She also echoes Aurora Leigh's (initial) refusal to marry Romney when she says that she prefers to "seek communion with the soul of song" and remain alone rather than wear the "martyr's crown" of wife and mother (182, 181). She answers Mr. Seymour's objections with aplomb; she concedes that motherhood is often "woman's highest mission," as he argues, but says "I fulfil my mission, sacred, too" (181, 182). She, like a mother, also "bears" a burden in bringing light to others' darkness: "The gift that came to me, I'll bear for aye" (182). In keeping with the powerfully oblique rhetoric of women's reform oratory, discussed earlier in relation to Eve, Sprague utilizes the ubiquitous appeal to woman's maternal nature against itself.

Bruce, in defending Miss Raymond's desire to remain unmarried, ignores her criticism of men and focuses predictably on her ethereal nature, saying that it is too pure to be held by any on earth: her soul "cannot brook the slightest earth-control, / But bursts forth free, impulsively, and strong" (186). Bruce admits that her unconventionality is admirable, but (thankfully) rare:

> There are but few such souls; they cannot tread
> The path that others mark; their course seems led
> But some strange destiny to earth unknown;
> Like some bright evening star they stand alone. (186)

Sprague repeatedly has women's views justified and elaborated upon by male supporters – occasionally, as in the example above, dulling down her critique – who, because they assume a sympathy of spirit, believe they can speak for her without risk of misrepresentation. Sprague's

cautious approach to social criticism, placing women's ideas in men's mouths, not only suggests the rhetorical utility of theatricality but also (delightfully) inverts the medium's channeling of immanence.

Sprague uses *The Poet* to comment on the challenges she faces as a female trance lecturer, but also to project a vision of the "thoroughly modern" woman artist who might follow. Miss Raymond's mentorship of Ida Seymour represents the continuation and progress of the woman artist's journey, and suggests that future women will not have to hide their creative talents behind the guise of spirit influence. Ida is inspired first by reading Miss Raymond's poetry and then by seeing her appear on stage as a trance lecturer. Ida literally "takes up" the message and makes it her own, illustrating the ideal response to mediumistic performance. Unlike the solitary Miss Raymond, however, Ida is aided by a number of like-minded supporters including her parents, Henry Bruce, and Miss Raymond herself. Likewise, where Miss Raymond claims direct spirit influence for her words, Ida carefully crafts and revises her poetry to gain confidence, with no suggestion of supernatural influence, beyond the loving encouragement of friends and family. Miss Raymond continually stresses the effort Ida must be prepared to expend but suggests that she, like Aurora Leigh, will achieve a balance of love and art that will ease the burden and sweeten the rewards. Illustrating the development from one (like herself) who works alone, and largely unsupported, to another who can respectably pursue her verbal art as poet rather than trance speaker, Sprague's *The Poet* projects a better future for the women who will come after her. Braude notes that trance speaking was a "transitional phase" for many women who became reform lecturers: "The flowing speech of trance mediums depended on a self-assurance unavailable to mid-century women who lacked spiritual inspiration" (97). Miss Raymond's careful tutoring of Ida (along with Bruce's diligent editorial help) suggests that the

younger poet will be a more developed version of herself, one who need not rely on the trance medium persona to gather or affect audiences. The truth of her prophecy rests wholly in the hands of Sprague's readers, after all, who must create the social conditions under which Ida might appear and prosper.

Despite opportunities for correspondence in the Spiritualist press, and intercourse among lecturers on tour, a career as trance medium lecturer was both difficult and lonely. The itinerant female lecturer was in a social position similar to the actress in the mid-century, as both shared a transient lifestyle. This vagrancy was, in fact, the only recurring source of frustration voiced in Sprague's journal. Trance lecturers also commonly travelled unattended, justifying their unconventionality as spirit-ordained rather than self-directed. According to Amy Lehman, actress and medium also shared "a kind of dislocation and instability arising not only from their peripatetic lifestyle but the changes in identity implied in playing many different roles" (6). This suggests that the performer's liminality transfers to her social status as well; while she has the power to move between and among conventional roles, she is unable to settle securely into any one of them. Sprague's acceptance of her loneliness is reflected in her representation of the similarly resigned Miss Raymond. Through her writing, as well as her living example, Sprague hopes to project a better future for the women who will follow in her footsteps.

As an inspirational speaker, Sprague draws on the model of reform oratory, techniques of theatrical staging, and expectations for sentimental gender performance, in order to make her presentation compelling to a diverse audience. In written representations of public speaking, she also integrates the ideas of fellow women writers to perfect the vision of the woman artist. Nineteenth-century women's poetry, Paula Bernat Bennett argues, was written and published as "an instance of speech whose expressive and mimetic power is organized explicitly or implicitly

for argumentative ends – in order to achieve a practical discursive goal: persuasion" (*Poets* 5). Seeking real effects, Sprague writes, the true poet must draw upon the real for artistic productions: "The world's true Poet teaches common things, / And makes a living power of what he sings; /. . . / Of real life, of real burning tears, / Of real soul-deep grief, and real fears" (31). For Sprague, one such reality was the unrelenting compromise involved in speaking in public as a woman.

Political Oratory and Poetic Prophecy

"And the people, upward springing / At the trumpet's sudden blast"
"The People," 96

Within the context of the Civil War, Sprague's aesthetic – influenced heavily by American political and reform oratory – takes on new significance and grave urgency. Sprague's mediumistic aesthetic offers a corrective to the failures of political representation in the American mid-century, most profoundly exemplified in the contradiction of principle and policy that led to the Civil War. Along with better-known Northern women poets Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Julia Ward Howe, and Lucy Larcom, Sprague participates in what Faith Barrett terms "a poetry-fueled war." In patriotic verse, written in the first years of the war and the last of her life, Sprague again follows de Staël's Corinne who, reflecting on her career as an Improvisatrice, resolves that women artists, like the country as a whole, "must look to make permanent creations, not fleeting ones – solid images, written constitutions, not transient improvisations that simply address the passing moment" (Goodden 66). Sprague's final poems represent a similar move from staged performance back to written text, as she reluctantly leaves her post as public speaker to become America's "recording angel" (*I Still Live* 4, 16). A sense of Sprague's performance presence is achieved in these poems through her assumption of a

nationalistic prophetic voice. The liminality of the ritual performance is particularly pronounced in these poems, as the medium assumes voices widely varied in time, race, gender, and circumstance. Speaking for the spirits of Revolutionary heroes, fallen Union soldiers, and dead slaves, Sprague projects a spirit army that assures patriots of righteous victory. Still encouraging action, but historicizing and divining rather than modeling it herself, Sprague's Civil War poetry posits American history as an unfinished drama. She is no longer helping audiences to believe but imploring them to *act*.

In a nation that famously "declared" itself into existence, the power of words to inspire and enact change is taken very seriously (Fliegelman 2). Oratory's centrality to American politics and nationhood has been well-covered by such scholars as Jay Fliegelman, James Perrin Warren, and Christopher Looby, the last of whom argues that the speaking voice registers the difference between the "abstract, alienated, rational polis of print culture and the more passionately attached, quasi-somatically experienced nation for which many Americans longed" (5). Oratory, not unlike the communal ritual discussed earlier, organizes individuals for collective action and binds them to each other and to their shared vows and claims. To this point, Fuller argues that even though the fact of slavery contradicts the nation's founding Declaration, "still it is not in vain, that the verbal statement has been made, 'All men are born free and equal.' There it stands, a golden certainty, wherewith to encourage the good, to shame the bad" (13). Fuller and Sprague share the conviction that verbal statements – whether an individual's or a nation's – carry weight and become a register of success or failure. In her poem "Wendell Phillips," Sprague notes how the orator's words "awaken" the material power of the rhetorical figures and symbols they mark, giving bodily form to abstract concepts like Tyranny, Liberty, and Truth. In Civil War poetry, Sprague warns American citizens that if they do not live up to

their nation's promise of "Liberty for all" and place the abolition of slavery before security of the Union, then those very words may come back to haunt them.

In his foundational formulation of the American jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch notes that the idea of America – America as a rhetorical entity – functions on multiple levels of meaning and value at once: "Of all symbols of identity, only *America* has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country's past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal" (176). The medium's liminality – her ability to "stand in" between past and future, matter and spirit, tenor and vehicle – means that she can speak on behalf of this ideal, operating as a disembodied voice and possessing a God-like scope of vision.[14] Sprague's patriotic verse contains no characters in the traditional sense, only rhetorical and allegorical figures. Even the lyric voice is abandoned: medium and message become one. Her own voice as poet-speaker becomes a type, an abstraction, a collective American consciousness: "exponent and type of Liberty / Between what was and what is yet to be She stands" (*I Still Live* 5). Speaking of a similar figure in Herman Melville's poem "America" (1866), Timothy Sweet writes that it is "the embodiment of American political subjectivity, the means by which we represent the mythos of America to ourselves – that is, we are supposed to see with the eyes of the one body politic and share its consciousness and values" (200).[15] Dramatizing in her own form of the jeremiad the nation's failure to live up to, in action, its own rhetoric and founding principles, Sprague demonstrates how words and actions must come together in the art of patriotism. Borrowing from period oratory the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and jeremiad, she adapts her idea of the "Living Poem" to American historical progress, more specifically. Sprague presents a haunted American landscape, with the nation's

founding historical and rhetorical figures speaking from beyond the grave, imploring Americans to realize their democratic vision in the present moment.

Inscribed specifically to Northern soldiers, *I Still Live: A Poem for the Times* is the most explicitly oratorical of Sprague's Civil War poems, stressing both the immediacy of the national crisis and the necessity of abolition. Anaphora helps to build momentum:

> Strike not for country but for liberty;
> Strike not for race, or blood, or power or fame,
> Strike not to keep thy country's flag or name,
> Strike not that other nations feel its might,
> But strike alone in the defense of right. (11)

Repeated end lines are also used to link stanzas, showing continuity of principle through various spirit speakers, each offering his affirmation of "I still live." The poem frequently uses both classical allusion and rhetorical questions, found together in the following line and used here to encourage readers' actions on behalf of a larger cause: "Does Cincinnatus fall, his work half done?" Antithesis appears in the either/or formulation, which distils the conflict down to two distinct choices: "Either a king must reign . . . [o]r must the 'rights of man' be well maintained" (10). Sprague employs nature imagery to represent slavery as "one deadly Upas tree" poisoning the Garden of America's democratic promise (8). The alternative is figured in the metonymic "crown'd Europe," which waits to applaud the failure of American democracy (13). Architectural imagery is also used, with America represented as Freedom's "last shrine" and a "home" for Liberty (6, 7). Sprague employs mechanical and organic imagery, saying the shrine is both "built" and "planted," in order to emphasize equally its well-planned foundation and its continued growth. Equality is the nation's "first great, granite corner stone," so it must be secured in deed (as well as word) to ensure America's enduring strength and stability (9).

Sprague also draws upon the jeremiad's warning and prophecy, popular in reform writing of the period and particularly prevalent in the literature of abolition. In "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852), Frederick Douglass employs prophetic warning against the nation if they choose slavery's continuation: "Oh! be warned! be warned!" (548).[16] Fuller also argues that demands for change must be heeded: "Think of this well! I entreat, I conjure you, before it is too late" (99). Sprague, too, warns of a slave uprising in *I Still Live*. According to the "great law of progress' mighty sway," she makes a sobering prediction:

> This same poor slave shall grow to strength and power,
> No longer at his master's feet to cower,
> And brooding over wrongs and miseries past,
> Shall rise in strength, in vengeance at the last,
> While burning with the wrongs no soul forgives,
> Shall seal in blood these words, 'The black man lives.' (10)

Sprague's linking of word and body highlights the use of individual bodies, like her own, to realize progressive principles. She imagines the war itself as embodied black rage, produced through the nation's long history of enslavement. This suggests that she speaks here not just as abstract Justice, but the spirits of slaves past and present.

Sprague's attention to American revolutionary history in her Civil War poetry and her claim to speak on behalf of it are consistent with women's reform oratory of the period. Studies of mid-century women's oratory show that sentimental ideology did not exclude the American woman from national discourse, but in fact gave her very specific and essential tasks in service to the nation (Levander; Buchanan; Kelley). Republican motherhood, women's Christian-patriotic duty of mothering the nation's future citizens, was "far from a simple ideology of passive and obedient housewifery – it also encompassed assertive and forthright codes of social and religious obligation" for women (Ganter 276). This view is expressed by Mr. Seymour, the representative voice of republicanism in *The Poet*, who argues that women not only have the

right to pursue "earnest purpose" in public, but the responsibility (65). Against those who see women's public involvement as merely an extension of private, domestic roles into a larger sphere, Shira Wolosky argues that these activities "can be seen as communal and indeed public work in the tradition of the disinterested civic virtue associated with America's revolutionary ideology" (*Poetry* 43). Women become the bearers of Revolutionary history and progress, resulting in the mid-century explosion of reform efforts, social movements, and relief organizations. The woman artist serves to remind the nation who it is and what it stands for, cutting through the haze of private interest and short-sightedness that often mars male civic action. Sprague's work, like period oratory more generally, demonstrates a "nostalgia for the disinterested collectivism of the early republic: in times of strife, individuals must sacrifice themselves for the good of the family and nation" (Ganter 281). It does so, however, in the context of the contemporary concern with confronting once and for all the presence of slavery within the nation.

The Civil War did not change Sprague's view of American history, but called her to action to defend a nation whose revolutionary history she had long reverenced as spiritual resource. A journal entry dated 17 November 1855, from Hartford, Connecticut details Sprague's visit to "The Charter Oak," a pre-Revolutionary site commemorating American autonomy from England. (Legend has it that Connecticut's constitutional charter was hidden in the hollow of the tree in late 1687 to keep it from English authorities). Sprague reflects, "Associations of the past are a sacred spell, linking that old decaying tree with the days of the 'Revolution' even farther back than that, & with the deeds of our father's fathers long past away, which this, one of their monuments, / still remains" (148-9). The popular imagination, historical memory, and local rituals can be as much a monument as built memorials of stone. She explains that "[f]or curiosity

& in honor of its age & companionship with the past & the deeds of the past," the people of Hartford sometimes dine at a table set inside the trunk's large hollow. Bodies and objects invested with symbolic and historical significance perform a "sacred spell," giving reassurance of connection, purpose, and meaning.

Sprague had last seen the Oak in summer, full of leaves, but is now struck by the sight of it in autumn, "with its naked arms & branches" (149). While it was beautiful in summer, she believes she "learned a deeper lesson" from seeing it worn and decaying. "It looked alone," she writes, "like some decrepit man that has lived to see the rolling of a hundred years, the last of all those who were his companions in early years. Like a veteran soldier covered with many a scar, yet still compelled to breast the waves of life & linger on while those who stood beside him in the bloody strife long since have passed away." The tree becomes a human body, a veteran soldier specifically, which figuratively ties national progress directly to the body of the citizen. As a site still visited and venerated by Americans, it "serves" and "works" to inspire continued sacrifice and loyalty. Sprague continues, "It is also curious & deeply interesting to see the veneration which man has for these relics of the past. Pieces of tin or zinc are nailed in places all over its trunk to protect it & prolong its life. I love to see such manifestations on the part of those who live in the present age" (149-150). These "manifestations" of a human relation to a national past reflect a kind of magic thinking that is embodied in mediumistic performance and writing, where the treatment of the past as a vital aspect of the present promises to guarantee a future. For her own remembrance, Sprague is able to find only a few leaves, "like memories of the past," hidden in the trunk to gather and preserve.[17]

Sprague's linking of the soldier's body with the nation's landscape – a common trope in Civil War poetry – had origins in antebellum political oratory, which shared a similar rhetorical

purpose of uniting a population for common action and historicizing that action as predestined or divinely ordained. In the Bunker Hill Monument Address (17 June 1825), Daniel Webster declares that the site is important not only as a marker honoring past history but also as a stage for enacting present change (106). He further emphasizes that the revolutionary spirit must be kept active and alive in America's citizens, not just memorialized in stone (108). Webster links the country's past with its future fulfillment, materially embodied in the soil that marks "this renowned theatre of their courage and patriotism" and a site for present action, as well (110). The patriots' blood was a pledge, a commitment, that current citizens must honor as a "great trust" and "sacred obligation" by making that same soil a stage where they too might "perform something worthy to be remembered" (124). Webster's notion of the nation as a stage where citizens act out its destiny is consistent with Sprague's view, as well. One important difference between the two is that Webster, in his Address, makes a distinction between the Revolutionary War veterans in attendance and those who died in action: "But, alas! you are not all here!" (111). Sprague's work amends this, allowing those lost voices to speak and to assure listeners of their continued presence: "I still live." Further, where Webster argues for present citizens to secure "permanent peace," Sprague, in fact, has those very voices calling for war to cleanse the nation. Spiritualists, in particular, utilized republican ideology and rhetoric to demonstrate continuity not just with democratic values, but also with revolutionary ones. Consistent with the idea of the jeremiad, they considered themselves "insurgents" on the antebellum religious and political scene, calling not only for the recovery of lost values, but resumption of the rebellious fighting spirit itself (Carroll 36).

In Sprague's "The Trial," the "blood of patriots" speaks to Civil War-era America on behalf of "The Past," telling citizens not to cease until the country is wholly rid of slavery.

Consistent with the mediumistic aesthetic, the past's impassioned call must be answered. If Americans allow the Republic to fail, they will only satisfy "kings and kingdoms" that cry against the people's power (17). The nation as a whole is a symbol of democratic principles on the world's stage; an international audience is awaiting its final success or failure. The American fight, Sprague argues, is less for its citizens than for posterity:

> Thou hast no common work to do;
> 'Tis for the coming years you bleed;
> If thou art worthy of thy time,
> Each drop of blood is precious seed.
> The fathers framed thy glorious plan,
> Now thou must prove its strength to man. (7-12)

Elaine Scarry describes the displacement of the soldier's body by ideology during wartime, such that a soldier's wounds take on representational status distinct from his body. In this way, ideology replaces injury as "the central act of war" (63). This is clearly operating in Sprague's poem, as she rhetorically transforms the blood of dying soldiers into "precious seed" for American progress. War, the "red right arm / [o]f battle," is a welcome and necessary sight at this time of crisis, when the country must purify itself in the crucible of change (19-20). The Civil War was seen by Union leaders, according to Bercovitch, as "a dramatization of the national myth," part of the continuing cycle of cleansing war and progress, a sense of history shared by Sprague (174). Sprague's poem ends with exhortation from the graves of Revolutionary patriots: "'Cease not to pour thy blood like rain, / Till it has cleansed the nation's stain!'" (35-36). The cycle of war and progress is here, through the image of a cleansing rain, also tied to a pastoral rendering of the nation as battlefield. Pastoral, Sweet argues, is used to "naturalize" both the war's violence and its eventual outcome (10). Like the jeremiad, the pastoral "as a literary mode and an American ideology, contained the means to restore itself . . .

[such that the American is] cultivating it in life and fertilizing it in death" (Sweet 8-9). The meaning of the soldier's death is recovered in the enduring soil of the nation.

Sprague's strongest statement on the nation as a haunted stage is made in "Emancipation in the District of Columbia." One year into the war, and nine months before the broader Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln signed the act that freed about 3,100 persons in the nation's capital and signaled a shift in the conflict's goals. The President's action closely followed the devastating losses at the Battle of Shiloh, during which nearly 24,000 soldiers died. Sprague's poem suggests that the "precious seed" of patriots' blood bears fruit in this political action:

> Ay, not in vain on Slavery's sod is shed
> The blood of our brave hearts, our cherished dead;
> For, thus baptized, our soil shall all be free, –
> The fruit of patriot's blood is Liberty. (45-8)

Basking in the inevitable triumph of time and progress, the poem glories that, with the abolition of slavery in the nation's capital, from "slavery's chain another link is riven!" (34). Relishing the first victory, the patriot poet looks ahead to the next. She establishes the critical "reecho" (a term appearing repeatedly in *The Poet*) of verbal art and the mediumistic aesthetic, presenting pairs of voices that call and respond to one another. Progress and power must be vocalized to be realized; first Freedom speaks, and is answered by the Eagle, and their exchange echoes the earlier ringing of the Liberty Bell, "[w]hich once our fathers' 'Declaration' told" (36). Sprague resolves that the stain of Southern soil will require the "pure" blood of Northern soldiers to make it worthy of a place in the national landscape. Only then will the nation be a fitting stage for principled action and progress.

Sprague's home state of Vermont was the first to abolish slavery (with the second article of its 1777 Constitution) and this fact was a great source of pride for Vermonters during the Civil

War. Sprague, in particular, delighted in the seeming prescience of her state's founding fathers. Though she did not live to see the war's end, dying in the summer of 1862, she was sure of its outcome. "Mountains," a largely sentimental reflection on her childhood home in Vermont's Green Mountains, written in Plymouth on 24 May 1862, questions how anyone could stand beneath the mountains' shade with a disloyal heart. Such people, she argues, "shame the soil from whence they sprung" (60). "They" here denotes both the mountains and the citizens, linking their origins and destiny. She then reflects on Old Scotia's Highlands, which in the thirteenth century reared the noble and proud William Wallace, and Switzerland's mountains, which bore their own patriot in the next century's William Tell (63-71, 72-80). Though the poem makes no direct reference to them or to the current conflict, a proud Vermonter such as Sprague surely also had the Green Mountain Boys in mind. A patriot militia headed by Ethan Allen in the American Revolution, the Green Mountain Boys held off British incursion from the bordering New York and New Hampshire provinces. They mustered again for the War of 1812 and once more in 1861 and each time, motivated by Ethan Allen's legend, members considered themselves the "descendants of heroes" (J. Marshall). Sprague asks the Green Mountains to teach her a similar strength, and to make her a patriot remembered long after her death:

> Teach me, sublime old mount,
> To stand like thee, defying clouds and storms,
> And wrap the snow-white mantle of a calm
> And holy resignation round my soul (149-152)

Significantly, this is the only free verse poem in Sprague's collected works and likely the final poem she wrote before death. Lacking the musical quality of rhymed meter, and replacing a prophetic voice with a plaintive lyricism, it conveys instead a sense of peaceful acceptance, with the poet going, in the final lines, where her soul will join those who "lose their light / [n]o more

forever" (157-8). With this, the most personal of her late poems, Sprague leaves her readers to take up the battle as their own.

The medium offers hope, the lecturer inspires community, and the poet as patriot calls a nation to war to defend its highest values and freedoms. The nation – conceived as a stage for commemorating national memory and making real a hoped-for future – realizes progress-through-adversity over time, making individual contributors' lives and actions into history. One way of relieving anxiety about an uncertain future, whether in one's own life or a national period of crisis, is to believe that it is in fact knowable because already "written," needing present players only to act out their parts in order to bring the inevitable next step to light. Anticipating her own end, Sprague seeks to be remembered, conjured, through the nation's enduring present.

Conclusion: The Business of Belief

While mediumship literalizes sentimental gender ideology – positing woman's perfect passiveness as a tool for society's improvement – it also represents for the medium herself a (temporary) escape from her socio-political status, the possibility of disembodiment, and transcendence of an isolated self. The medium's public display as Woman permits freedoms that individual women (particularly a working-class, unmarried, invalid woman such as Sprague) would not otherwise enjoy. Molly McGarry, discussing medium Cora Scott, notes the problematic (at least for modern-day observers) payoff of mediumship: "On the one hand, she spoke, but her speech was understood as ventriloquized; she received no credit for her own intellectual, verbal, or performative skills. On the other hand, she carved out a space and commanded a public unique for a woman of her day" (39). While the medium's mode of speaking suggests ideal feminine passivity, her message itself might (and often did) challenge such notions. The political value we today ascribe to the "ownership" and "credit" of artistic

creations, and even to individual identities, was neither a practical possibility nor a real prize to many women in the mid-century. In spite of the complex self-presentation required to suggest a supposedly genuine and natural feminine inspiration, there is – as Glennis Stephenson suggests of Pythia, Oracle of Delphi (who was said to speak in hexameter verse) – "a woman behind the melodramatic floor-show, a woman who takes the opportunity this offers to speak exactly as she wishes" (5). Regardless of the political implications the medium's gendered selflessness raises for us in retrospect, Sprague effectively utilized the position to produce a public voice within existing limits for women.

Although Spiritualism was only one aspect of Sprague's broader mediumistic aesthetic, it did provide her an invaluable point of entry into public life. As a subject of public interest and discussion, Spiritualism also focused contemporary debates about the role of women in public, the nature of the artist, and the place of performance in culture. Spiritualism is commented on in a number of nineteenth-century novels, including Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, William Dean Howells's *Undiscovered Country*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Old Town Folks*. Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) tells the story of Verena Tarrant's transformation from inspirational speaker to women's rights activist, and the struggle waged over her between Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom. Glenn Hendler considers James's the most skeptical view of the sentimental politics of affect, as he seems convinced that Verena's "bizarre form of asubjectivity is the logical consequence . . . of trying to perform femininity publicly" (147, 149). Victoria Olwell, however, suggests James "does not expose the sham of inspired speaking in the novel so much as frame the mid-nineteenth-century conventions of female genius in the anachronistic fin de siècle terms by which it assumes the character of a

scam" (67). Though Sprague takes the most optimistic view of performance of any of the five poets considered in this dissertation, she was not unaware of its complications for women.

While Sprague's *The Poet* repeatedly echoes the hopes of Barrett Browning, Fuller, and de Staël for the bright future of the woman artist, it also anticipates the satire of James, particularly in the love triangle suggested between Ida, Bruce, and Miss Raymond. There is no firm evidence that *The Poet* was a source for *The Bostonians*, but similarities in relations between the three main characters suggest that Sprague, like James, sensed the potentially unresolvable conflict surrounding the public woman in nineteenth-century America. Miss Raymond's and Bruce's shared "romantic" interest in Ida, and competing visions for her future, makes the dynamic similar to that between Olive, Basil, and Verena in James's novel. Though Bruce consistently encourages Ida's efforts to write and publish (acting as her editor and revealing her identity as poet "Cora Lee" to her parents), and even facilitates Miss Raymond's mentorship of her, he also hopes to marry her. There are hints of competitiveness between Ida and Raymond, both for Bruce's affections and in their public service aspirations (164, 173). Worse still, Bruce literally uses Miss Raymond's words to woo Ida: unable to put his own feelings in words (claiming "but I am prosy") he reads aloud to Ida from a love poem written by Miss Raymond, which allows him to admit his feelings indirectly. He later thanks Miss Raymond, as she "wrote the words with which to win [Ida's] heart" (176).

Most significantly, there is no direct talk about Ida's taking the stage for public performances, either by Bruce or Ida, though it is clearly in Miss Raymond's plans for her. She, like James's Olive, seems to have much greater ambitions for her female charge than the charge holds for herself. The reader is left to wonder if Bruce might have chosen Miss Raymond – with whom he connects on spiritual and political terms, and is closer in age to his thirty-five years

than seventeen year old Ida, though she is not their equal in socioeconomic status – if she were not a performer, or if his feelings for Ida will change if she assumes that role. Any potential complications are left untreated by Sprague, who utilizes the novelistic convention of the happy ending and gives the final words of *The Poet* over to Mr. Seymour's paternal blessing of Bruce and Ida's engagement. Although Ida represents the poet's ideal (future) woman artist, her acceptance by Sprague's assumed readers requires that the final scene show her "weeping," "kneeling," and *not* speaking (188). Sprague, no less (but certainly differently) than later nineteenth-century critics or twenty-first-century readers, understood the paradox of this staged silence, which she both scripted and performed.

CHAPTER FOUR

"And the Play is – the same sad thing":[1] Maternal Pedagogy and Performance in the Poetry of Sarah Piatt

There has never been a shortage of critical attention to the dramatic or theatrical elements in Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt's poetry. Contemporary reviews from *Atlantic Monthly*, *Literary World*, and *Scribner's* routinely remarked on it, with one from 1880 concluding that Piatt "is nothing if not dramatic" ("Recent Poetry"). More recently, scholars have focused on the poet's skillful use of the dramatic monologue and dialogue forms, with Larry Michaels arguing she used it to achieve a speech-like line; Paula Bennett, to reconceptualize poetry as public debate; and Matthew Giordano, to perform the role of periodical poet. Likewise, Piatt's treatment of bourgeois society as theater, middle-class identity as role-playing, and antebellum Southern culture as fictional setting have been widely discussed in relation to the poet's transition from plantation-born Southern belle to Northern bourgeois wife. Frequent references to tragic figures such as Hamlet, Beatrice Cenci, and Bellini's Norma, repeated use of performance venues as settings (most explicitly in "A Ghost at the Opera," "At the Play," and "At the Playhouse"), and even the title of her 1880 collection *Dramatic Persons and Moods* are typically read as protofeminist commentaries on postbellum American politics and culture. Remarkably, however, the centrality of performance to Piatt's poems on children has been almost entirely overlooked.[2] Representing domestic performances of storytelling, role-playing, and mourning, her mother-child poems explore postbellum tensions regarding sentimental ideology and related social practices. Piatt's poetry is not simply "dramatic" – either in its form or its publication mode – but instead represents the centrality of scripted display to the everyday lives of women in nineteenth-century America.

Piatt was the most prolific of the five poets considered in this dissertation, publishing seventeen collections of poetry and nearly five-hundred poems in thirty different periodicals between 1854 and 1911 (Bennett *Poets* 139). She was also the most socially "conventional" woman – neither recluse, celebrity, nor itinerant lecturer – in the group. Piatt was born in 1836 on her family's slaveholding plantation in Lexington, Kentucky and educated at the Henry Female College in New Castle, Kentucky. In 1861, she married John James (J.J.) Piatt, a federal employee (and fellow poet), and moved North. They eventually had seven children and lived variously in Ohio, Washington, D.C., and Cork, Ireland, moving as required for J.J.'s work.

This chapter focuses on poems written and published by Piatt in the 1870s, making her the latest of the poets considered.[3] Because the period of Reconstruction responded directly to issues exacerbated by the Civil War, it is appropriate to include this decade of Piatt's work in the dissertation's mid-century frame. As Ben Railton, Mary Louise Kete, and others have noted, the postbellum period represented a "waking up" from and coming to terms with the dreams and illusions of pre-war American culture and history. The empire of the mother, too, began to lose its symbolic force during the Civil War, when the nation-as-family metaphor was strained to its breaking point (Wearn, *Negotiating* 26). Kete writes that "sentimentality itself helped to generate its own replacement by the poetics of realism . . . enacting a kind of mourning for the world that preceded" the turbulent American 1860s (147). Piatt's child poetry dramatizes the tensions surrounding sentimentality's decline, particularly its implications for language use. Piatt's poetic children reveal themselves as enforcers of sentimentality's values and codes, often exhibited through their literal interpretation of language, while Piatt's mothers are subversive language

users, attuned to figuration, ambiguity, and irony. Clothing her own emergent sensibility of irony in the residual sensibility of sympathy, Piatt as periodical poet spoke two languages at once.

Piatt's poems from the 1870s, considered within the context of contemporary pedagogical performance, expose the middle-class home as a site of reading, instruction, and socialization for both children and their mothers. For Piatt, this period was marked by the births of the last three of seven children and the deaths of two (in 1873 and 1874). A direct biographical context for Piatt's poems should not be assumed, however; her work addresses the paradoxes of sentimentality in a skeptical age rather than her own experiences as mother. Within sentimental culture, the role of Mother was perpetuated via domestic displays – as maternal storyteller, socializing agent, and child elegist – through which the culture's values (and its faithful subjects) were reproduced. By the 1870s, sentimental demands for stagings of normative domesticity were still required but its iterations were beginning to wear thin, as Piatt's representation of them reveals. Piatt's use of dramatic dialogue in mother-child poems, in fact, follows the established convention in both children's and women's didactic literature of the age; readers, literacy narratives, domestic manuals, and sentimental novels routinely utilized dialogue between mother and child to demonstrate the proper use of texts as tools for instruction. Instead of (re)producing a sentimental script for mother-readers to follow in their own homes, however, Piatt's poetry provides a view of such domestic practices *as* performance.

Piatt's poetry on children, disguised as conventional women's writing, reveals both Mother and Child as ideological constructs, indelibly tied to texts and performances of texts (acts of reading and writing) within sentimental culture. While grounded in its familiar settings, themes, situations, and forms, and mimicking its didactic rhetoric and aims, Piatt's poems challenge the ideological assumptions underlying sentimentality as literary mode and social

practice. Two recent dissertations situate Piatt within the context of contemporary literary genres and related reading practices – the periodical press for Matthew Giordano (2004), and the infant elegy anthology for Jessica Roberts (2005). This chapter argues that not just genre-specific writing conventions and reading practices, but broader ideologies of reading underpinning both, shaped Piatt's poetry. We are not only socialized through reading, James Machor argues, but socialized *into* reading, "trained and positioned into and through social practices for making sense of discourses" (*Reading* 3). In the nineteenth century, this training took place within a context of heightened readerly performance, with reading instruction focused on standardized oral display, and readers encouraged both to identify with characters while reading and to imitate positive models in their own social interactions.[4] Reading and writing within sentimental culture were public acts believed to produce, via their performance, reliable affective outcomes. Such sentimental faith in what stories could "do" came into conflict, Piatt's poetry suggests, with the harsh realities of the later nineteenth century – the Indian Wars, Reconstruction, economic depression, and unprecedented urban and industrial growth. Robin Bernstein's argument that children materialize the culture of childhood through their engagement with "scriptive things" (books, toys) can be usefully extended to women's domestic performances, as well (*Racial* 8). Piatt illustrates her ambivalence toward sentimental ideology by problematizing, through her own writing, the conventional lessons, morals, and effects believed to be gained from reading. What is more, as "scriptive things" themselves, Piatt's mother-child poems challenge assumed readers to self-consciously consider their own expectations for and uses of literature in the postbellum American home.

Focusing on acts of reading and writing in the domestic sphere, Piatt's work reveals how literary conventions and conventions of literacy functioned as modes of transmission for the

patriarchal, ethnocentric, and classist assumptions of sentimental culture itself. The sentimental reader should, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's words from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "feel right" and cultivate appropriate sympathies and antipathies in line with white, middle-class, domestic culture. To read differently – whether by selection of unfit material or interpretive mode – posed a danger to sentimental culture itself. A mother who dared to read differently was especially dangerous, since the nation as a whole depended upon her proper training of the next generation's readers (Robbins 16).[5] Expectations for writers were no less constrained. In order to "establish a proper role for its readers," Machor writes, works were expected to instruct their audience, display a clear ethical purpose, be consistent in use of genre, present a controlled narrative voice, and depict realistic characters (*Nineteenth* 70). Not just individual stories, but faith in narrative form itself, took on extraordinary power in the sentimental imagination. Piatt's verse challenges all of these standards in order to point out the dangers of applying sentimental expectations and interpretive strategies to modern social life. Specifically, she dramatizes the risks inherent in a faith in appearances, uncritical acceptance of conventional gender roles, expectation of narrative order and closure, belief that sympathetic identification equals empathetic engagement, and failure to recognize and respond to cultural and socioeconomic difference. For these reasons, the critical frames of performance, reader-response, and feminist language theories can help us to better understand Piatt's mother-child poetry within its contemporary context and her larger body of work.

Both the mother's role as socializing agent and the book's power as pedagogical tool were tied to the rise of the cult of domesticity and the reconceptualization of motherhood in the nineteenth century, as the division of public and private spheres came to dominate considerations of social value and identity. Literature occupied a highly privileged position in nineteenth-

century America, Sarah Wadsworth argues, "and a great deal of power accrued to its capacity to mold readers – both individual and in the aggregate – and to shape society locally, regionally, and nationally" (3). Piatt shows how women's domestic performances were particularly tied to this sacralizing of texts within sentimental culture, as they were uniquely charged with ensuring the continuation of its values and practices. Maternal advice literature, such as Lydia Huntley Sigourney's *Letters to Mothers* (1838), proliferated in the 1830s and 1840s, representing "the disciplinary practice of the new model family" and encouraging readers to learn its techniques and mimic its form and practices in their own home (Brodhead 22). By the mid-nineteenth century, "motherhood was no longer considered just one among many feminine duties, but became, for better or worse, the defining role of most women's lives" (Wearn, *Negotiating* 2). A number of Piatt's poems comment on this singular focus: "There were no need of anything / Without the baby, you must know!" ("If I Had Made the World" 7-8).

Books, as material objects filling shelves and as signifiers of cultivation, took on extraordinary power within the home and even imparted some modicum of power to the mother, who "took special responsibility for imparting cultivation through print" (Rubin 249). Though fostering a sense of feminine agency and purpose, the empire of the mother was, Mary McCartin Wearn argues, "at its core an essentializing ideological tool that served to regulate not only women who were mothers but also the children those mothers raised" (*Negotiating* 135). With the home's primary function the character formation of children, and its chief tool the book, reading became "the nurture-centered home's chief pastime, gathering point, and instrument of domestic instruction" (Brodhead 45). Piatt's mother-child poems address how sentimental ideologies of reading not only reinforced patriarchal hegemony itself, but prescribed women's roles as reproducers of and through it.

Sigourney, in *Letters to Mothers*, warns mothers about the peril of their station: "[W]ho can refrain from trembling at the thought, that every action, every word, even every modification of voice or feature, may impress upon the mental tablet of the pupil, traces that shall exist forever" (101). These images highlight the performative nature of the mother, and the importance of all aspects of her domestic displays to the child's resulting development. Piatt's husband J.J. said that she would often incorporate words people actually said, particularly those of her children, directly into her poems (Bennett, *Palace-Burner* xxxv). Piatt's mother-child dialogue should not be confused with a record or reminiscence of actual speech, however; its use underscores the scriptedness and materiality of sentimental domestic displays. Piatt's poems illustrate how conventions for sentimental behavior and identity act as a cultural script women are expected to follow and to repeat through the transmission of texts and ideologies to their own children. As Margaret Homans articulates, "motherhood is a process of repetition that has dangers, both for mothers and for children" (*Bearing* 167). The exchange of language between mother and child is both repetitive and reciprocal, David Bleich argues, such that "actual words and phrases are taken from others, put into new contexts, sometimes changed, and then repeated" (117). Piatt's poems demonstrate this potential for both scripted and subversive uses of existing sentimental forms in lived practice. The pages that follow look first to poems about mothers' instruction and entertainment of children through reading and storytelling, then to poems about children's display of their learning through role-playing and games, and lastly to poems on child death as a challenge to the writer's own socialization as sentimental mother. Piatt's poetry represents a self-conscious approach to the stories mothers tell – both through storytelling and writing – and what kind of world, narratives, and subjects are engendered through them.

Maternal Pedagogy: Mother as Reader

"Yes, it is hard to spell S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e . . ."
"If I Had Made the World,"1877, line 24

Piatt's poems on maternal instruction and storytelling parody the social reading scenes between mother and child found in domestic literacy narratives, children's didactic literature, and sentimental novels. In *Letters to Mothers*, Lydia Sigourney encourages mothers,

> Commence with simple stories, from the Scriptures, from the varied annals of history, from your own observation of mankind. Let each illustrate some moral or religious truth, adapted to convey instruction, reproof, or encouragement, according to your knowledge of the character and disposition of your beloved students. Care and study may be required to select, adapt, and simplify. But can any do this so patiently as a mother, who feels that her listening pupil is a part of herself? (95)

Sarah Robbins notes the importance of illustrations in nineteenth-century domestic literacy narratives which, through highly coded visual representations of "domestic literacy in action," demonstrate the proper use of texts in maternal pedagogy (43). Illustrations picture mothers, seated comfortably in well-appointed and orderly middle-class homes, with attentive child-listeners at their knees. Such depictions of "feminine literacy as a generous, pleasure-giving performance" assume a uniform interpretation of and response to the stories being told (Robbins 39), a fiction that Piatt's poems expose. Bernstein argues that most children are virtuoso performers of childhood because, through attention to literary and visual models, they "understand with precision the behaviors that children's things script" (*Racial* 28). Piatt shows that mothers, too, are attentive to the models, both visual and verbal, provided for them in sentimental texts. Piatt's collection *Poems: In Company with Children* (1877), published in 1882 as *A Book about Baby*, includes illustrations similar to those described by Robbins, though the visual message is sometimes at odds with the poem's representation of domestic scenes. The book's original title produced debate among reviewers over whether the poems were merely

about children or written *for* them, though I imagine Piatt intended the ambiguity. The book's re-publication under a new name, like the illustrations themselves, may have signified publishers' attempts to help guide readers' interpretation and use of the book in domestic settings. Both as a mother and as a published writer, Piatt was deeply invested in, and ambivalent about, the implications of sentimental ideologies of reading.

Piatt's poems take place in "sentimental culture's most cherished space," the domestic setting of the mother-child bond (Wearn, "Subjection" 167), but reveal it to be highly politicized and fiercely contested by demanding audiences and conflicted performers. Instead of the unified response to mother's instruction offered in conventional literacy narratives and their illustrations, Piatt's poems represent the possibility of varied, even conflicted, responses to shared texts. These struggles help to reveal each participant's relation to the dominant discourse – while Piatt's mother-speakers are often skeptical of the stories sentimental culture tells about itself, her children are believers in its tales and faithful to its forms, values, and authorities.[6] Norman Holland's concept of "identity themes" is helpful for understanding the varied responses offered by readers and listeners in Piatt's mother-child poems. Holland argues that interpretation is a function of identity and that "all literary interpretations interrelate 'objective' features of the text in a 'subjective' way" ("Transactive" 337). Each reader "will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies" ("Unity" 816). For this reason, interpretive differences between mothers and children cannot be resolved, only exposed. This helps to explain the "radical ambivalence" of Piatt's work, which, Zachary Finch argues, represents an "unwillingness to assert rhetorical resolutions," thus defying "the ideological stances and sympathetic identifications normally found in sentimental poetics" (415). As listeners and learners, Piatt's poetic children act as enforcers of sentimental ideology, while her

mothers more often attempt to subvert it. Dramatic tension in Piatt's mother-child poems arises not only from interpretive conflicts between mother and child, but within the mother-as-reader herself. In her role as reader, the speaking mother's private struggles with existing social conditions and personal feelings for her children come into conflict with her duty as socializing agent (and even her own lingering desire for the comforts of faith). The question for the mother-as-teacher becomes, "How do we turn children into free citizens, who will follow adult orders, and, at the same time, be allowed to entertain new possibilities for the future and to exercise their will?" (Elbert xviii). Piatt's mothers find themselves at odds with the stories they are expected to tell, no less believe in themselves.

Analogizing her role as maternal storyteller to that of public poet, Piatt's poem "A Book About the Baby" (1877) presents a demanding child-audience who insist that their mother write something about the new baby in the house. The mother must satisfy childish expectations for a reliable sentimental narrative: conventional images and symbols, clear development and progress, and a pithy Christian moral. The children's speech is narrated through the mother's voice, showing how their expectations become her problem to bear as performer:

> So, the book about Baby must all be new? –
> No, not one word of it old?
> Well, then – why, the Baby's two eyes they are blue,
> And the Baby's one head it is gold. (5-8)

She acknowledges their demands but, finding them impossible, offers the conventional words and images which, while they allow her to speak, reduce her expression to cliché. Intelligibility precludes originality, Piatt argues, since to be understood (or published), her words and images must follow convention; while the baby itself may be "all new," the words and images used to tell its story are anything but. Even the baby's own vocalizations must be translated in order to appease the child-listeners:

And the Baby tells tales with the darlingest words,
That mean – what you never can guess!

Ah, the Baby believes he's an angel, no doubt,
And wants to go back to the sky; –
Yes, that is just what all the trouble's about,
And that is just why he *will* cry! (15-20)

The baby's gibberish becomes an affirmation of its conventional role within sentimental culture, as its idealized innocence means that its sounds must *mean* something important. In her story of the baby, Christian faith is the motivation for the baby's cries, though its real meanings are either unknowable or incommunicable (and thus unproductive as narrative elements).

Piatt ends the poem with the mother's self-assessment of her work; she pronounces her creation a success: "Now, my book is all new, for who ever has said, / Before, that – the Baby is sweet?" (23-24). Everyone, in fact, has said the baby is sweet (what else can be said of the baby, really?) but her conventionality in this case has matched sentimental expectations for a moral lesson, so her audience is satisfied. The mother-speaker pleases her audience through her performance of conventionality, though Piatt's careful readers sense the poet's distrust of such tidy and predictable stories. Through a seemingly innocuous exchange between a mother and her children, Piatt shows that both Mother and Child are expected to make sense of their lives and world through the stories sentimental culture provides. Further, she shows that storytelling – whether as maternal instructor or public poet – is a performative act that "makes" things true by narrativizing them into consumable forms consistent with the broader ideological discourse.

Sentimental culture placed the Bible at the center of domestic instruction and named mother as biblical storyteller, responsible for passing conventional interpretations of the text down to future generations of Christian Americans. Mothers and children not only read the Bible together, but were trained to interpret or "read" events and lives according to the narrative of

salvation. Poignant examples of such Bible-reading lessons are offered in sentimental novels including Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and readers such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Stories for Young Persons* (1841). According to Robbins, "Repeated references to the Bible as the primary literature for literacy development helped situate women's domestic teaching in a tradition affirming believers' ability to access the Word directly" (72). By the 1870s, however, the Bible's singular authority had been eroded by geologic science, evolutionary theory, and the biblical scholarship of High Criticism. Still, "the Bible's power to define models, morals, and social strictures" was largely unchallenged within sentimental culture itself (Wolosky, "Women's" 191). This disconnect between domestic practice and developing knowledge – suggesting broader exclusions of women from "the world" of mind and action – is reflected in the ambivalent stance of Piatt's mother-speakers. Piatt repeatedly draws a sardonic contrast between the ephemerality of women's oral culture and the assumed permanence and authority of male-authored texts, starting with the Bible. At the same time, Piatt's poetic child-listeners faithfully appeal to the Bible's authority to resolve questions of truth, identity, and morality.

Piatt avoids making explicit challenges to Christian doctrine and sentimental ideology by referring to resonant content in children's stories – fairy tales, ballads, and fables. Put another way, in the guise of maternal reader, Piatt commits acts of writerly subversion, likening sentimental culture's faith in particular biblical, historical, and romantic stories to children's belief in imaginary realms. Piatt directly links the narratives of Christian faith and American destiny with the fancy of children's literature in "The Gift of Empty Hands (A Fairy Tale)" (1874), "Questions of the Hour" (1878), and "Sour Grapes" (1873).[7] In "Keeping the Faith" (1877), the mother tells her children they "must . . . believe in Fairy-land . . . / Forever, child" (1-

2). (For Piatt's mothers, *must* is more often an acknowledgement of inevitability than a direct order. The poet often uses didactic language and rhetoric to undercut, rather than affirm, the "lessons" of sentimental culture.) The mother provides examples of faithful endeavors (with questionable ends) from both history and literature – Columbus's discoveries, soldiers' wars, and Cinderella's daring. As proof of faith's usefulness to them, the mother explains that a sentimental worldview provides a reliably picturesque and well-ordered setting for social performances of both joy and sorrow. They "must" believe, she says

> Because it is so pleasant to believe in:
> There are so many pretty things to do,
> Such light to laugh and dance in: yes, and then
> Such lonesome, rainy woods for one to grieve in. (15-18)

When the children ask if she ever believed in Fairy-land, the mother answers:

> Did I believe in Fairy-land? I do.
> The young believe in it less than the old.
> As eyes grow blind and heads grow white and whiter
> (The heads that dreamed about it in their gold)
> We change its name to Heaven. That makes it true,
> And all the light of all the stars grow lighter. (31-36)

Among believers, the telling of the tale, and its faithful repetition, "makes it true." In actuality, Piatt argues, sentimental faith – whether in the Bible, American progress, or bourgeois domesticity – amounts to little more than "beautiful tales" told and repeated, though perhaps no longer fully trusted within postbellum culture ("Child's-Faith" 1). Piatt's storytelling mother again offers a performance of belief, designed to satisfy her duties as sentimental storyteller and socializing agent, but revealing to readers her own profound doubt. The appeal of sentimental faith remains, even for her, though her confidence in its continued viability is shaken.

Child-listeners' demands for narrative consistency empower them as co-performers who can join in (and even take over) by faithfully repeating the words of tales and songs, or

correcting mothers who "tell it wrong." William Wells Newell, in 1883's *Games and Songs of American Children*, describes the "conservatism of children," such that even "the inconsequent rhymes of the nursery must be recited in the form in which they first became familiar; as many a mother has learned, who has found the versions familiar to her own infancy condemned as inaccurate, and who is herself sufficiently affected by superstition to feel a little shocked, as if a sacred canon has been irreligiously violated" (28). The tie between repetition and religiosity noted by Newell is a trope Piatt returns to time and again in her poetry, as it highlights the intersection of text and performance in social exchanges of all kinds within sentimental culture. Piatt's poems show that children's conservatism goes beyond just the demand for consistent versions of stories, to judging their believability and the piety of the teller. In the poems "Love-Stories" (1872) and "Questions of the Hour" (1869), a mother refuses, in the first, to tell a requested story and, in the second, to "read it again," and children retaliate by questioning her commitment to Christian values and even her love for them. The children have learned to equate mother's satisfactory storytelling with her own successful socialization and, more importantly, to make her (at least momentarily) do the same.

The conservatism of children is seen also in "More About the Fairies" (1877), which parodies the collaborative nature of domestic instruction by showing the difficulty, rather than the predictability, of piecing together knowledge of world and self through a shared experience of reading. The poem begins with the mother-speaker telling her listeners that she has already told them "as much / . . . as ever I knew" about the fairies from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3-4). The children suggest that she refer to the Bible for more information, and she regretfully informs them, "The Bible says nothing about them at all" (8). This fact prompts the child to ask, "Then why did God make them?" (9). Why would God create them but leave

them out of *his* book? The mother-speaker scrambles to settle the child's worries, suggesting that the fairies were perhaps hidden in the lilies of Eden when he made Eve, and so were left out of the Bible, though present in actuality. Next, she suggests that perhaps the fairies were made after the flood, directing attention to another key, memorable moment in their Bible stories. The listeners sense that their mother is stalling, so they challenge her directly:

> 'But if they are not in the Bible, why then
> They are not anywhere – for they cannot be true?'
> They're in – next-to-the-Bible! The greatest of men
> Believed in them, surely, as much as you do.
>
> You do *not* believe in them? – 'It would be sin
> To believe in things out of the Bible?' Oh, dear!
> Fair sir, are you not rather young to begin
> To be doubting the faith – of one Mr. Shakespeare? (17-24)

If fairies appear in Shakespeare but not in the Bible, then they cannot be true and, by extension, Shakespeare is a sinner for writing (and their mother is a bad teacher for reading) fairy-stories. In this hierarchy of reliable sources, it is important to remember both the contemporary cultural valuation of Shakespeare as second only to God among "authors," as well as debates over the Bible's historical validity. The children reverse this cultural argument, challenging Shakespeare's truth-telling with the Bible's authority. The mother, for her part, finds her own rhetorical authority limited (according to her listeners) by her choice of source material.

Through newspapers, and as an alternative to children's literature, Piatt's mother-speakers try to teach children lessons about real-world issues such as poverty, war, and politics. Matthew Giordano notes that Piatt's first book did not appear until 1864, ten years after her first poem appeared in the *Galveston News*, and that "the periodical was the original site of publication for virtually every poem she wrote" ("Lesson" 47.n1). That Piatt should have challenged her own representation in print by writing poems about reading newspapers –

textualizing her own interpretive activity – is particularly instructive and appropriately performative. These poems include "From North and South (A Lesson from the Newspaper)" (1878), "The Story of a Shawl" (1879), "The Palace-Burner (A Picture in a Newspaper)" (1872), and "At Hans Andersen's Funeral" (1877).[8] Frustrating their mothers' attempts to teach social lessons, children's investment in bourgeois social roles and values narrows their ability to empathize with figures who are unlike them in circumstance or viewpoint. The children identify with figures in the stories, but not in ways the mother expects or intends. Instead of inspiring feelings of charity or sympathy, stories of hardship offer, for girls, a reason to cling more desperately to a position of privilege, and for boys, a setting for consequence-free adventure and daring. Neither can read beyond his or her sentimental subject position. As an ideological context, or what Stanley Fish terms a "standard story," sentimental discourse authorized the validity of its own productions and interpretations, asserting its own version of reality as the truth (239). However, as Fish points out, truth is a determination made from within the standard story, in relation to which believers are characters and thus "simultaneously enabled and limited by the ways of thinking and seeing it constrains" (199). While the mother hopes to expand their interests and sympathies to places and people distinctly unlike themselves, perhaps taking a larger national or even global interest in the human condition, her children remain firm in their reading of "the world" as middle-class America.[9]

"From North and South (A Lesson from the Newspaper)," first published in *Youth's Companion* in 1878, directly addresses reading as a performative act of ideological revision. The poem begins with a child's exasperated response to her mother's instruction: "'Some people have the loveliest time. / I'm tired of learning everything!'" (1-2). As proof of others' carefree existence, the girl reads aloud the letter of a Northern bourgeois socialite printed in the

newspaper – "only one year / Older than I, too" – and envies her description of dressing for a ball (8-9). Focusing on the color and cut of her dress and hair adornment, she reads how the girl looked "[m]ore queenly than a queen," reflecting her own fairy tale fantasy (11). Concerned that her girl is both over-identifying with the privileged debutante and claiming the text as "proof" of her own unfortunate position, the mother directs her to read a letter from the South, also printed in the paper, which provides a stark contrast to the first. The girl reads, "'Nothing but Death is here . . . / And Misery following Death" (21-2). The girl-speaker's shift from detailed description to abstraction makes explicit the limits of her sympathetic identification; she "sees herself" in the image of the Northern socialite because it is the ideal she has been taught to desire, but finds "Nothing" that speaks to her experience in the story of the broken South. Repeatedly, Piatt challenges sentimental faith in the assumed "equivalence of affect" between girls as textual objects and as readers by showing the failure of identification across class or culture lines. The girl attempts to use the realist text to "prove" to her mother that her own life is hard (relative to the debutante's), while the mother uses it as proof that her life is easy (relative to the Southerner's). The source text itself cannot resolve the conflict, or convey the lesson either wants to transmit to the other, but only seems to reflect back (or, in some cases, determine) each reader's vision of the world and her role in it.

As in the previous poem, many of Piatt's storytelling poems end in mutual dissatisfaction, with mother and child unable to communicate, as if speaking different languages altogether. In "The End of the Rainbow" (1877), the speaking mother's tale of loss fails to satisfy her child-listener's expectations for how the story should end. Countless legends and folktales suggest that if one follows the rainbow to its end – not unlike sentimental confidence in following a story to its profitable conclusion, or Christian faith in the narrative of salvation – a

pot of gold will be the reward. The listening child wants to know the literal "way" to the end but, as it is not a literal place but a process of faith and disillusionment, the mother can express it only through metaphor ("It is past all flowers . . . The pretty new moons faded out of the sky"). While the child believes that the end of the rainbow must bring a prize, the mother argues that the "reward" is not gold but an end to such illusions. Instead of a bright pot of gold, the scene is stark:

> At last, in a place very dusty and bare,
> Some little dead birds I had petted to sing,
> Some little dead flowers I had gathered to wear,
> Some withered thorns and an empty ring. (13-16)

This linking of natural and cultural objects (birds, wedding ring) with lost faith in their staying power is powerful because these objects are all conventional literary images for woman herself. The mother's disappointment in having found the end of *her* rainbow(s) is echoed in the child's response to the story. The poem ends in mutual dissatisfaction:

> . . . My fairy story is told.
> (It does not please her: she has not smiled.)
> What is it you say? – Did I find the gold?
> Why, I found the End of the Rainbow, child! (17-20)

The mother's frustrated response suggests her conviction that disabusing her child of fantasies will be best for her in the long run. The child, however, wants stories to satisfy by adhering to conventions, not by revealing new truths that challenge those already believed. The child cannot escape the romantic fantasy that she has become invested in, and the mother cannot communicate anything to her child without using sentimental culture's language and forms, even when her lessons contradict its teachings.

A final storytelling poem shows how Piatt's mothers contend not only with demanding audiences, but also with their own limited rhetorical authority in sentimental culture. Lydia

Sigourney strongly cautions mothers against any creative or impromptu storytelling because, since women "are proverbially gregarious and sociable," in her hands, "[s]ubjects of discourse are prone to become trifling or personal, unless elevated and replenished from the world of books" (182).[10] Unable to escape the rhetorical confines of her gendered nature, Sigourney suggests, the maternal storyteller must rely on (male-authored) printed texts in order to do the work sentimental culture requires. Piatt alludes to the danger of women's personal stories in poems including "The Sad Story of a Little Girl" (1877), "My Babes in the Wood" (1871), and "Words Over a Little Bed at Night" (1871), which show mothers responding to their children's growing autonomy with attempts to control them through the stories they tell.[11] These poems take Sigourney's earlier suggestion – that the mother, "who feels that her listening pupil is a part of herself," is the best teacher (95) – to its enigmatic conclusion. In these poems, the mother turns her listening children (specifically, their younger selves) into storied objects, and hides herself behind the mask of objective storyteller, seemingly hoping to teach them a lesson to prevent their continued maturation and her consequent loss.

In "The Sad Story of a Little Girl," the mother disguises her personal connection to the story by invoking the sentimental myth of women's emotionality as readers, explaining that she cries when she tells the story about the lost baby "[b]ecause – her mother loved her so" (7). Instead of identifying themselves as or with the figures, the listening children actively shape the narrative, attempting to solve the "mystery" of the missing children using lessons learned from previous stories. One child suggests that perhaps Gypsies or Fairies took the baby, a theory that the mother confirms in an attempt to retain their attention and interest by speaking their language of story:

> "Did fairies take her?" It may be.
> For Fairies sometimes, I have read,

> Will climb the moonshine, secretly,
> To steal a baby from its bed,
> And leave an imp instead. (21-25)

Bernstein comments on the sentimental treatment of childhood as an "act of disappearing," wherein death is not "dispossessive but . . . preservative" because it prevents the inevitable loss of child-ness through maturation (*Racial* 24). Piatt, as Mary McCartin Wearn argues, viewed motherhood "as an essentially elegiac experience" ("Subjection" 174). While Piatt's mother attempts to literalize this sentimental "preservation" by turning listening children into poetic objects, the shared act of storytelling unexpectedly makes their loss (to the now listening mother) complete.

Piatt's use of the domestic learning environment to make bold statements about narrativity, truth, and identity was not entirely original in later nineteenth-century American literature. Elizabeth Stoddard's 1874 children's book *Lolly Dinks's Doings* offers a similar approach to conflicts between mothers as storytellers and children as listeners. Stoddard, like Piatt, exposed the difficulties inherent in childrearing "by parodying the rhetoric of a prescriptive didactic discourse" rather than challenging it directly (Troy 155). The mother-speaker of Stoddard's story attempts to shape her listener, who is also the hero of the story, into "a great example for little boys," but her subject resists. Like Piatt's child-listeners, Lolly Dinks as listener gets "caught up in the story and contributes to the storytelling with questions and interjections, but pays no attention to its possible moral" (Troy 153). The broader social ramifications of such didacticism become especially apparent when reading an advertisement for the book, directed to the parents of potential child-readers, from the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* of 1873. Readers are warned that Lolly is no model child: "He is simply his own startling little self, bewitching sometimes in his baby way, but not to be imitated on any account"

("Lolly" 190). The advertisement implicitly encourages the use of texts for modelling character, while explicitly excluding this one naughty example. Sketches by Mark Twain – "The Story of the Bad Little Boy That Bore a Charmed Life" (1865) and "The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper" (1870) – also burlesqued the didactic genre and its broader aims. What is new about Piatt, however, is her critical treatment of these conventions in poetry rather than fiction. Contemporary readers of women's poetry – and of women's poetry about children, in particular – were more likely to assume a biographical basis for such writing, and to expect confessional rather than narrative verse.[12] Piatt's unruly poems challenge readers to consider their own investment in sentimental ideologies of reading, and its potential implications for women and the children they raise.

Piatt's poems on maternal instruction and entertainment of children begin with the domestic settings and situations of conventional mother-child poetry, but expose their origin in sentimental scripts rather than natural relations. It is the generative role of woman through language use, rather than her generative nature through biological reproduction, that most interests Piatt as poet. Through the reading of sacred and canonical literature, contemporary newspapers, and traditional children's literature, mothers attempt to engage and satisfy demanding child-listeners while also performing their duty as sentimental socializers. Piatt's self-reflexive poems – stories about storytelling – also address women's socialization as sentimental readers and the limits of their verbal authority. Her poetry challenges not only representations of normative domesticity in sentimental texts, but the expectations sentimental readers bring to texts of all kinds (including her own).

Child's Play: Rehearsing (and Resisting) Mother's Lessons

"[He] made him a mock throne and tried to please / Himself with playing"
"The Brother's Hand," 1870, 32-33

As with the oral culture of storytelling, the repetitive aspect of play brings special joy and a sense of mastery to the child: "The proper performance of the round, or conduct of the sport, was to youthful minds a matter of most serious concern – a little drama which could be represented over and over for hours . . ." (Newell 12). These words from Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children* suggest the scriptedness of play which, according to performance theorists and cultural anthropologists, reinforces the value of communal identity as it enacts it. The player demonstrates his or her understanding of the larger culture, its rules, and values by imitating conventional roles and behaviors. Sociodramatic games of role-playing are particularly effective in demonstrating how "well" the child is socialized into, and through, dominant ideology. Children's development of characters in play – complete with motivations, justifications, costuming, and props – shows they are attentive to the social stagings of identity in postbellum culture. Play's role in the child's development of self-control means that while the game brings pleasure, it is rule-based rather than unrestricted. In order to remain in the game, the child must subordinate herself to the rule of behavior for the role she is playing; it is an internal rule, a "rule of self-restraint and self-determination, which teaches the child to desire by relating her desires to a fictitious 'I,' to her role in the game and its rules" (Vygotsky 100). The essential attribute of play is neither freedom nor pleasure but, Lev Vygotsky argues, "a rule that has become a desire" (99). Newell, like Victorian culture as a whole, projects a romantic idealization of the child and childhood entertainments: "True child's play is a sacred mystery, at which their elders can only obtain glances by stealth through the crevice of the curtain" (12). Rather than a release or escape from the adult world or sentimental ideology, however, Piatt's poems on

children's domestic performances reveal even child's play itself as a powerful socializing force within postbellum culture.

Instead of simply "a mother's poeticization of her children's life and talk," as one contemporary reviewer described them ("Recent Literature: *Woman's*"), Piatt's poems on children's domestic performances constitute biting social commentary on rehearsals of gender and class divisions in contemporary culture. The mother-as-teacher becomes an observer when her children display their learning through domestic performances such as role-playing, games, and their own attempts at storytelling. Like their conventional expectations for mother's stories in the previous section, here their own domestic performances reflect the rules of behavior associated with the social roles they hope to assume. "One's self-conception," Cheryl Walker argues, "is determined in part by the social vocabulary of one's culture" (88). Like the storytelling mother, children in play rely on conventional figures, words, and forms to interpret the world around them and to rehearse their roles in it. As Bernstein argues, however, "Children do not passively receive culture. Rather, children expertly field the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself" (*Racial* 29). The child's growing autonomy, as he or she puts learning into action, is reflected through the children's voices which dominate these poems. Their words, in fact, show them to be frighteningly perfect copies of the social identities they take on, suggesting Victorian childhood is a rehearsal of inescapable ideological behaviors.

Piatt shows children's innocence to be not just, in Bernstein's words, "performed transcendence" of social categories of race, class, and gender (*Racial* 6), but a dangerously regressive investment in outdated sentimental scripts for subjectivity and social engagement.[13] Gendered connections to textual models – boys to the Bible and contemporary newspapers, girls

to sentimental novels and fairy tales – further reflect contemporary culture's valuation of genres and modes relative to representations of "truth." Through children's faithful use of them, their inadequacies are revealed to audiences – both watching mothers and the poems' readers.

Child's play in Piatt's poetry dramatizes the social implications of gendered differences in reading instruction for nineteenth-century children. The "uni-sex childhood" that had prevailed in the early nineteenth century had given way by 1850 to "distinct differences between maleness and femaleness that reflected changes in the gender roles of adults" (Gray & Fowler 40). According to Lindal Buchanan, gender-specific school readers for girls stressed religion and morality as themes, while boys' readers more often presented material on patriotism and war (33). Through their reading, and consistent with other socializing influences, boys were encouraged to act, while girls were taught to bear and endure. Girls, especially, were trained to follow textual models as scripts for gendered conduct, as evidenced in the popularity of mid-century writings on Shakespeare for girls.[14] Mary Cowden Clarke's five-volume series, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-2), constructs the lives of nineteen heroines from fifteen plays, telling their stories up until the action of each play in order to show how girlhood performances of gender led to either success or tragedy in adulthood (Ziegler 219). Anna Jameson's *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (1832), renamed *Shakespeare's Heroines* in 1879, similarly presented Shakespeare's women as example for girls to learn from. The middle classes after 1850 began to accept the necessity and legitimacy of social forms they once condemned as social hypocrisy and "to accept a new view of character as a theatrical part to be played by respectable men and women" (Halttunen 167). According to Cathy Boeckman, in the nineteenth century "character" referred to "a quantifiable set of inherited behaviors and tendencies," which determined how successfully an individual would reflect the

traits of the dominant culture (3). Sentimental faith in the reliable development of gendered character became a self-fulfilling prophecy: children had only to follow established scripts in order to demonstrate their successful socialization.

"Playing Beggars" (1870) presents a dialogue between two siblings debating how best to "play" beggars, though it implicitly reveals shared sentimental scripts for gendered behavior. The rule-based nature of sociodramatic play means that participants must abide by a shared understanding of the role(s) being played, which is often highly generalized and stereotypical (Gray 5). In their discussion of beggars, each child takes the side (and, in effect, takes on the role) of the parent with whom they most closely identify, dramatizing the parents' disagreement on issues of poverty and charity. When the children discuss the possibility that beggars are only "im--posters," one argues, "You know they are, because Papa says so, / And Papa when he calls them that looks mad" (3-4). Richard Brodhead's study of middle-class socialization through "disciplinary intimacy" explains the importance of parental models of belief and behavior:

> From the child's perspective, what the parent-figure believes in comes across indistinguishably from his love, so that the child imbibes what the parent stands for in a moral sense along with the parent's physical intimacy and affection. The child's first love *for* the parent becomes, accordingly, an inchoate form of allegiance to what the parent represents – a fact this scheme of rearing then exploits. (20)

According to the father (and his faithful child-listener), the beggars who appear on their doorstep asking for help are actually rich, "rich as Jews or queens, / And they're just playing beggars when they cry –" (16-17). An article in the *Daily National Intelligencer* of 1869 details the problem of "professional beggars" who "by well forged tales of suffering, by exhibiting woe begone countenances, and by importunate entreaties, solicit and obtain alms" ("About"). The article's warning about "frauds" is reflected in the father's attitude toward the beggars at the door, suggesting that such deceit is only discernible to the man of the house. "His Mother's

Way" (1880), a companion piece to "Playing Beggars," contextualizes a boy's overly simplistic view of his parents' responses to tramps as something learned from newspapers, suggesting the patriarchal basis of the paper's "realist" renderings of both women and beggars. This rhetorical linking of the problem of beggars with the charity of women shows, as Susan Ryan argues, that poverty represented not only a "crisis of national identity" and of race, but of gender as well (47). For her part, the sentimental mother (as represented by child-speakers) in "Playing Beggars" naively believes every sad story she hears and is thus vulnerable to "imposters" of various kinds. Where the boy and his father imagine they "read" events and experiences realistically, the mother and girl are relegated to a sentimental worldview, demonstrating the perceived gendering of literary modes.

While the first child identifies with the father, the second identifies with the mother, arguing that she was not deceived by the "poor ragged soldier at the door," but "was right / To give him coats – because he had to fight" (9, 11-12). The child believes not only that Mamma was right in helping him, but that the soldier's story represents his actual past, though it sounds suspiciously melodramatic – he was "starved to death in prison once somewhere, / And shot dead somewhere else" (10-11). This child reasons that if the beggars were actually rich, surely they would not waste their time in pretending to be poor, but would use their resources to do something "good." Predictably, the girl has less to say than the boy in the poem, and is allowed less input in how their play will take shape. Through the girl's characterization, Piatt shows how girls and women are written into identities they then must "act out" for approving audiences. It is clear that Piatt is suggesting the children are simply imitating the behaviors they see around them, rather than crafting their own visions of gendered identity.

The boy scripts lines for his sibling to deliver while playing beggar, also giving firm directions for realistic costuming and makeup:

> But – do play beggar. You be one; and, mind,
> Shut up one eye, and get all over dust,
> And say this: 'Lady, be so very kind
> As to give me some water. Well, I must
> Rest on your step, I think, ma'am, for a while –
> I've walk'd full twenty if I've walk'd one mile.
>
> 'Lady, this is your little girl, I know:
> She is a beautiful child – and just like you;
> You look too young to be her mother, though.
> This handsome boy is like his father, too:
> The gentleman was he who pass'd this way
> And look'd so cross? – so pleasant I should say. (31-42)

The child who was once the subject of the "real" beggar's discourse is now author and director of the pretend beggar's pleadings. His beggar is also a woman, adding an interesting dynamic to the exchange, as "she" attempts to flatter the mother with compliments about her youthful appearance, attractive family, stylish clothes, and high moral standing (39, 42, 45, 54). The boy's scripting of the female role for his sister to act out helps to reveal gender's artificiality; as Judith Butler describes it, "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (*Gender* viii). In line with sentimental expectations for gendered identity, when represented through child-voices, Piatt's girls appear naïve, self-centered, emotional, and materialistic, while boys are violent, controlling, determined, and precocious.

The sentimental tragedy of the beggar's story builds to a fever-pitch, with her house burned down, baby starving, and husband and grandmother dead (all in just four lines). The scripted lines continue for four six-line stanzas, until the would-be performer, exasperated, decides, "Oh, it's too long. I can't say half of that!" (55). She wonders who would want to "be" an imposter anyway, as "[t]hey're worse than Christians, ghosts, or -- anything!" Aside from too

much suffering, beggars, Christians, and ghosts apparently have too many lines to memorize, making for unpleasant play. In play theorist terms, the rules of behavior governing the idea of "beggar" have become too restrictive, so the girl chooses to leave the game and return to her role as middle-class child (P. Gray 2-3). While the child doesn't want to play a female beggar – opting to be "a great man or a king" instead – she says that she would not refuse one charity: "I should like to give one my torn hat, / So I could get a prettier one, just now" (60, 57-8). Even the girl's own words show her to be more concerned with consumption than charity, undermining the reader's faith that a sentimental worldview would either acknowledge or challenge injustices such as poverty. In their careful preparation for playing beggars, the child-performers act out – through words and objects – the distinct gendered identities exhibited through their parents' domestic disagreements over the war and its socioeconomic consequences**.** Piatt's use of direct dialogue throughout, and the absence of a maternal mediating presence in the poem, heightens the reader's sense of the children's "innocence" in presenting such an incriminating representation of bourgeois domesticity.

Like girls' preoccupation with appearances, young boys' penchant for physical violence (illustrated in "Playing Beggars" through the boy's fascination with a beggar's sword and war stories) recurs in several of Piatt's poems and likely reflects its frequency in the pages of gender-specific readers from the day (Robson 152). The fact of violence is less important to Piatt, as poet, than boys' ideological justification for it. "Two Little Sextons" (1877) presents a mother questioning two boys about their outdoor activities, which appear to her like the sexton's task of digging graves. She acknowledges, initially, that the children mean no harm by their "pretty trade," and speculates that "it may be / For love of making graves that graves are made" (1, 2-3). The job of gravedigger, however, requires bodies needing burial; if they cannot find dead things,

they may have to make things dead. She notes that they have "sharply laid / To rest" both thorns and "faint" blue flowers, trampling both feared and loved growing things alike underfoot.[15] As the mother of the poem attempts to maintain a lighthearted tone, not betraying her suspicions about troubling "[s]udden and secret" burials, one child admits that they have killed butterflies, also. With the mother seemingly approving her son's "young light logic" as "very fair to hear," the poet delays the full shock of his admission until the final two lines. The boy proudly announces: "We had to kill them, for they would not die, / So they could turn to angels in the sky" (13-14). Sigourney's *Letters to Mothers* advises using animals and nature in maternal instruction to teach lessons of kindness toward God's creation: "Teach their little feet to turn aside from the worm, and spare to trample the nest of the toiling ant . . . make them shudder at the cruelty which could rifle [the bird's nest's] treasures" (98). While the boys in Piatt's poems frequently display little regard for the glories of nature that Sigourney refers to, here the justification for their brutality paradoxically accords with their instruction in Christian doctrine and sentimental culture. The boy, God-like in his mastery of nature, confidently takes charge of the situation in order to effect what he believes is best for the butterfly. We see a similar pronouncement in the poem "After Wings" (1871), in which the boy claims the butterfly was too proud – "His fine wings made him vain" – and so needed to be made a caterpillar again (2). The repeated "Two Little Sextons" at the start of each septet, the whole of which differs only slightly from the rhyme royal form, creates a disturbing friction between the content and form of the poem, and suggests the mother's distanced, ironic framing of the whole. In this poem, the boy's Christian teaching provides him not simply with a role to assume in play, but verbal justification and rationalization for his questionable behavior as bourgeois male.

W.D. Howells, normally a strong supporter of Piatt's work, took issue with what he termed the "want of taste" of this poem in his *Atlantic Monthly* review of May 1878, illustrating how, as Shira Wolosky argues, nineteenth-century women and their poetry "are regarded as private even when they address and engage social and political issues" (*Poetry* 33). Howells questions not just Piatt's choice of poetic subject, but her mothering:

> Nothing is more noticeable in children than their propensity to play at funerals and grave-digging and dissolutions; but when they are caught at these dismal dramas, they are very properly and very promptly stopped, with more or less abhorrence on the part of the spectator; and it is not good art, however true, to celebrate in verse for children the caprices and fancies of these infantile undertakers.

I would argue that we are meant to be disturbed by the children's behavior, and their confident justification of it, and the mother-presence in the poem is not unmoved but carefully controls her own response (both directly to the children and indirectly to the readers) in order to heighten ours. Through the "distancing neutrality" of an ironic observer, Paula Bennett observes, Piatt is "blocking in her speaker's voice the very emotions she wished to encourage in her readers" (*Poets* 156). The point of the poem, I think, is not an approving nod to children's gratuitous violence, but the irony of the fact that the same reasoning used by adults to explain child death should come from a child's mouth to justify his own senseless actions. Piatt's concern in this and other mother-child poems is with what goes wrong when ideology is uncritically accepted as a basis for truth and identity. The maternal ambivalence of Piatt's mother-speakers represents not personal feelings toward her own children, but concerns about the larger culture's socializing structures and women's implication – as "reproducer" – through them.

While Piatt's boys are free to engage in pure fantasy, assuming roles in play that they may never aspire to in life, girls more often practice the one role they are destined to fill: bourgeois wife and mother. Just as the mother's attempts at storytelling were constrained by her

limited authority as woman, so too must her girls rely upon sentimental scripts to rehearse their social roles as Christian homemakers. In "Her Grown-Up Doll's Needs (A Hint to Mamma)" (1880), the reader's perspective is aligned with the mother's, who is positioned at a distance and must listen while the daughter directs her own tale, which "innocently" reveals the questionable values of modern commercial culture. The girl-speaker decides it is time for her doll-child Rose to grow up, which means to trade in the clothes of a child for those of a young woman. The doll's growth seems to mirror the girl-speaker's, as she determines that the doll's outside must be made to match her inside: "You really cannot guess how much she knows. / (She's read some charming novels, anyhow.)" (3-4). Equating "knowledge" with novel-reading suggests the contemporary view of women as voracious readers (and writers) of novels rather than poetry, highlighting the genre hierarchy as well as the encouragement of women as consumers of novelty rather than serious readers of works of genius (Newlyn 323). The poem's rhymed iambic pentameter heightens the sense that the child-speaker is imitating adult speech patterns. Repeatedly, the doll's development is measured in terms of her consumption of questionable objects – novels, dresses, and others' affections. Like any "good" bourgeois mother, the child-speaker takes pride in her doll's ability to provoke envy and interest from others, noting that her gloves must be the latest style so she'll "get more flowers than all the other girls" and, with a beau to take her out, "she would be much admired" (8, 12). Finally, the girl tells how "old" the doll is by reference to her own birthday, "years and years ago," when she received her as a gift: "She could not be a baby yet, you see; / Why, then I was a child myself, you know!" (14, 15-6). Like her adult counterpart, the mother-speaker of the storytelling poems in our first section, the girl here mourns the loss of her doll-child's infancy; as a part of herself, the child's age signals

her own. The mother can only watch and listen as the daughter assumes her destined role as sentimental storyteller.

One final poem on child's play, "The Funeral of a Doll" (1872), narrates a young girl's response to her doll-child's death and the failure of sentimental and Christian mourning conventions to comfort her. Here, the girl's engagement with her doll problematizes, rather than confirms, sentimental culture's idealization of both mother and child. The poem exemplifies, in Bernstein's words, how "constructed childhood and juvenile humans exist in tension with if not in opposition to one another" (*Racial* 22). The doll is named Little Nell after the character in Charles Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*, "[i]n memory of that lovely child / Whose story each had learned to tell" (2-3). Like her namesake, the doll is idealized: "slight and still and mild, / Blue-eyed and sweet; she always smiled," suggesting the sentimental inevitability of the perfect child as dead child (4-5). The doll's funeral service is highly stylized and regimented, serving its own communal agenda rather than the child-mother's personal grief. The children try to include all of the conventional elements for a funeral, though sized for a doll: a "tiny bell" tolling, a choir of birds, white flowers, a "paper coffin rosily-lined," and a Preacher speaking on the "virtues of the Doll now gone" while offering "many warnings to the bad" (8, 13, 29, 23, 20-22). With the girl insisting on a proper American middle-class funeral for *her* Nell (an impoverished British orphan in Dickens' tale), Piatt illustrates one of the ways in which, according to Bernstein, "children's play performances revise rather than only reify narratives" ("Children's" 163). Further, such modifications suggest the child-reader's interpretation of the text, its characters, and significance in terms of her own subject position.

As rain falls on the doll's grave the first night after burial, the child-mother helplessly exclaims: "How dark! – and do you hear it blow? / She is afraid" (36-7). The child's worries are

precisely those spoken by "real" grieving mothers in Piatt's child death poems, as we will see. While this suggests the universal experience of mother-grief and the mother-child's introduction to the burdens of womanhood, it also highlights the genuine artificiality of any mother's public response to private loss. The fictionality of the death (there are no dead human bodies – the child grieves for a doll, the mother for her child's innocence) does nothing to alter grief's expression. The (actual) mother's grief – we hear her thoughts briefly in lines 29-30 – is, in fact, as much for the child's "loss" of her doll as for her automatic assumption of the mantle of sentimental domesticity as a naturalized, habitualized identity. The final stanza is given over to quoted monologue of the child-mother, with the mother self-consciously removing herself from the scene, rhetorically and dramatically.

Although the distanced narrator of "The Funeral of a Doll" critiques the Victorian idealization of the child, we realize that such sentimental images and figures are inescapable for rendering grief knowable (or feel-able) for readers. Can grief itself be so over-written, so utterly common, that it becomes parody? The child knows which images and objects she must use to display or perform mourning within sentimental culture – tears, flowers, bells – but the objects fail to satisfy; they no longer function as they are expected to. Oscar Wilde famously said, "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without – laughing." Particularly in the wake of the Civil War, attitudes toward death and mourning came into conflict with vestiges of antebellum sentimentality: "What was touching in 1840," Angela Sorby argues, "was ridiculous by the 1880's" (xxii). The "poor performance" of Nell's death commented upon by Wilde could be the fault of either Dickens, through overused conventions, or the reader as sentimental audience, through overwrought response (Eaton 278). Through her poems on child death, both

imagined and actual, Piatt suggests sentimentality has become a dynamic requiring too much (or not enough) of both writers and readers.[16]

Piatt's poems on children's domestic performances, like those on maternal storytelling, consider connections between sentimental ideology and social practice, between literature and the values it promotes and reflects. As children act out the models provided by sentimental culture, mothers gain insight into the sometimes unpredictable power of cultural influences, including their own domestic performances. Where poems on storytelling mothers and child's play reflect concerns about the sentimental roles children are expected to assume, Piatt's poetic performances as mourning mother more explicitly address expectations for her own displays as woman writer. In this final set of poems, Piatt dramatizes tensions between scripted and subversive uses of child elegy among women readers and writers.

Sentimental Performances of Mourning: Mother as Writer

"But then an angel's wing / Is a remote and subtle thing"
"Comfort – By a Coffin," 1876, 19-20

The mother's inscription of loss through the writing of child elegy represents one facet of her required performance via Christian and sentimental mourning rituals, in which "the mourner had almost entirely upstaged the dearly departed for the lead role in the sentimental drama of death" (Halttunen127). The grieving mother is encouraged to use her experience of loss to become a better Christian and, as a writer, to persuade readers to do the same. Instead, Piatt as poet links the idealization of the (dead) child to her own "revered" status as mother and mourner, and problematizes both. According to Wearn, "When a culture defines subjectivity and citizenship in terms of women's maternal nature and a child-care function that must eventually disappear, women suffer inexorable loss" ("Subjection" 175). As a public poet, Piatt is unable to

escape conventional sentimental forms and images if she wishes to communicate with contemporary readers, but she uses them primarily to reveal their insufficiency. Piatt rejects the commodification of child elegy as a popular genre, as well as public performances of mourning and consolation, and instead attempts to re-privatize the poetic inscription of loss. In particular, she objects to the abstracting, vehicular, and mediumistic use of individual experience to engender communal consolation – both morally, as a mother, and aesthetically, as a poet.

While Spiritualists such as Achsa Sprague found comfort and purpose in renewed contact with the dead, for Piatt, "middle-class women's sanctioned role as channel to the dead was not . . . a reconnection of severed attachments but, rather, a source of constant, unremitting pain" (Bennett, *Poets* 127). Piatt gave birth to at least seven children, though she lost three in infancy or childhood and three more as adults (Bennett, "God's" 131).[17] Piatt wrote poems about child death even before these personal losses, illustrating again that her thematic concerns were not limited to, nor did they directly reflect, her own life experiences. With the assumption that shared grief is both lessened and made productive, sentimental mourning denies any loss has occurred (because the loved one is now home with God) and insists on memorializing and circulating reproductions through memento mori, keepsakes, elaborate mourning rituals, and child elegy anthologies. Paradoxically, within sentimental culture and related ideologies of reading and writing, woman is most fully herself when merely a woman-type or vessel, inviting and allowing others to channel emotions and ideas through her. For readers, according to Glenn Hendler, "sympathetic identification leads to a depersonalizing loss of self, albeit a morally valorized one" (138-9). Mary Louise Kete argues that unlike traditional elegy, which assumes the self-sufficiency of the writer to handle and express grief, the sentimental lyric "coerce[s] a collaborative response to loss that depends as much on the reader's symbolic actions as on the

writer's" (61). Both in form and through its circulation within the economy of consolation, the sentimental child elegy "evacuates" any intended referents, opening up "Mother" and "Child" as roles to be assumed by readers, transforming actual subjectivities into performative identities (Roberts, "Little" 145). Piatt finds that the performances of mourning required of sentimental readers and writers have been strained to the breaking point, particularly in the wake of the Civil War and the stark realities of death it brought to light. In the poems that follow, Piatt challenges both the literary conventions and social dynamics of sentimental mourning; she shows how ideology fails when its own abstract (and abstracting) goals are taken to their logical conclusion.

Sentimental culture's original model of the mourning mother was the biblical Rachel who, "weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children because they *were* not" (Jeremiah 31.15). Mother of Joseph, and representative mother of the Ten Tribes, Rachel laments both the actual deaths of infants killed by Herod and the potential deaths of those in captivity, fearing altogether for the future of God's chosen people. God promises a "reward" for her labors, in the form of a new covenant with the house of Israel, and instructs her to be consoled: "Thus saith the Lord; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy" (31.16). Kete explains, "Rachel's twin actions, her gift of lamentation and her gift of the cessation of lamentation, elicit from God the return of gifts in the forms of his promise and its fulfillment" (65). Rachel's role is not just to bear grief, but to wear it as a mantle – to perform the role of representative mourning mother in accordance with God's promised covenant.[18] Her submission means that she must bear children, mourn their loss, and accept consolation in order to carry out the woman's role in the narrative of salvation. This required exchange – a performance of

lamentation, followed by acceptance of another's performance of consolation – establishes the dynamic guiding sentimental sympathetic identification between writer and reader in child elegy.

Woman's rhetorical function within sentimental ideology, like her narrative function within Christianity, complicates her attempts at subjectivity beyond them. Throughout her child death poetry, Piatt and her mother-speakers are conflicted by their simultaneous status as representative mother (writer/speaker of child elegy) and actual mother (of dead child). The "cultural work" that the child elegist is expected to perform within sentimental culture is not unlike Rachel's role in the Christian narrative of salvation: personal loss must be transformed into communal redemption. The role of mourning mother as "written" by God, in fact, becomes the scriptive basis for Piatt's subversive maternal poetics. In exchange for the abstract promise of spiritual salvation, real women must lose real children; this arrangement, Piatt's poems suggest, is insufferable for those unsure of Heaven. Scripture suggests that Rachel's refusal to submit to God's command would mean rejecting the promised Messiah, whom he condescends to be "born" of a woman: "How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? For the Lord hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man" (Jeremiah 31.22). From Rachel's point of view, however, she is consenting to another woman (Mary) losing another child. What if women refused to perform the role of grieving mother as scripted? What if one could, in fact, "go back," claim Rachel's spot and re-write the narrative altogether? Experimenting with the gendered limits of storytelling as a performative act, Piatt's mothers illustrate both the real danger to women of following sentimental culture's scripts too closely and the potential danger to patriarchy itself of women who disregard them altogether. Piatt's child death poems suggest that a re-reading of sentimental texts through a critical perspective may allow, as Fish argues, women to tell, and be told by, a new story (200).

Piatt rejects Christian consolation at its very source – its representation in the Bible. In the poems "Her Blindness in Grief" (1873) and "We Two" (1874), written soon after the death of two of Piatt's children within one year, the mother expresses her frustration with admonitions against seemingly extravagant displays of grief through criticism of male Biblical figures Christ and Job, dismissing alike the resurrection story in the first poem and the lesson of Job's submission in the latter. In "Comfort – By a Coffin" (1876), the mother-speaker repeats phrases from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, but places them in parentheses and as questions in order to reflect their insufficiency. Judging the Bible's own words and models as inadequate, even cruel, she argues that they offer no real help or even truth, in human terms. Further, Piatt places the words of scripture and of sentimental sympathizers alike in quotes, linking them in their failed attempts to comfort her. In "We Two," especially, the human re-assurance "God's will is the best" is paired with God's own "Lo! I am well pleased" (4, 23). Piatt figures the failures of Christian consolation and sentimental sympathy in terms of storytelling – they offer make-believe where realism is required.

The limits of God's power to console the grieving mother are described by Piatt in terms of his failures as author of the world – they are narrative failures. As Wearn notes, "Piatt's deity seems to have more in common with Melville's harsh Calvinist God than with the sentimentalists' benevolent lamb" ("Subjection" 170). In "No Help" (1877), God's existence in heaven proves inconsequential for the grieving human mother. His existence, in fact, would only heighten her sense of injustice at the child's absence because, while it would "prove" the Biblical narrative of resurrection as true, it would do nothing to change the fact that the child is inaccessible to her on earth. God's existence speeds events to their destined ends, but it is his disinterested writing of those ends that proves unjust: "God cannot help me, for God cannot

break / His own dark Law – for my poor sorrow's sake" (29-30). God as performative writer of the world is limited by the narrative he has "written" and thus set in motion regarding human salvation through death, and mothers are crucially implicated in and through this writing. A similar view is offered in "Answering a Child" (1875), which says that God's power is limited to progress, speeding an already-written fate or narrative to its conclusion. God can do – "But he cannot undo / . . . For the past it is vain to pray" (16, 20). As grieving mother, Piatt is forced to consider her own gendered implication in Rachel's "deal" with God through her investment in sentimental culture.

Sigourney's *Letters to Mothers* says that, because of woman's greater sensitivity to anguish, her experience as a grieving mother provides her "an opportunity more permanently to benefit by the discipline of Heaven" (262). As Halttunen describes it, "By weeping freely the mourner was believed to assist God in preparing his heart to receive divine grace" (130). The dead child becomes an enticement to Heaven: "The glorified spirit of the infant is a star to guide the mother to its own blissful clime. Is it not her wish to be where her babe is? And will she not strive to prepare herself for its pure society?" (Sigourney 262). To the mother who would question God's choice in taking "the most lovely and promising" of her children, Sigourney asks, "You do not grudge that the gift should have been in some degree worthy of Him who resumed it. Oh no!" The rhetorical questions with obvious "correct" answers make the sentimental reader feel responsible for reaching conclusions that accord with those of Maternal Authority herself. Piatt's poems on child death ironize these conventions of sentimental writing, and it is possible to envision Sigourney as the unseen consoler, given her status as "the undisputed master of antebellum consolation literature" (Wearn, "Subjection" 169). In poems like Piatt's "No Help"

(1877), the speaker offers unexpected answers to the rhetorical questions posited by sentimental consolation literature.

> Is he not with his Father? So I trust.
> Is he not His? Was he not also mine?
> . . .
> And do I want a little Angel? No,
> I want my Baby – (13-14, 25-26)

"The act of condolence, like all Victorian tact," writes Halttunen, "involved a formal acceptance of the genteel performance of another – in this case, the mourner's performance of bereavement" (150). This sentimental social exchange reflects the arrangement ordained by God to Rachel: lamentation followed by consolation. By responding in the negative to rhetorical questions assuming an affirmative, Piatt rejects the agreed-upon script for genteel mourning and consolation, as well as God's scripting of the role of representative mother.

The verbalizing and repetition of sentimental fictions troubles Piatt's mother-speakers as it represents a performance of consolation through Christian storytelling that has no real effect. With domesticity's oral culture one of the few areas empowering women as speakers, she is particularly concerned that women so often repeat fictions among themselves. A demand for silence, then, is a way of interrupting the received script. The speaker of "Her Blindness in Grief" commands "Let me be," demanding the silence of those who would speak to her of God's grace (49). The same silence is asked of sentimental comforters in "Comfort – By a Coffin" – "Ah, friend of mind, / The old enchanted story! – Oh, / I cannot hear a word!" (1-3). She tells them to keep the conventional images and words to themselves: "Say nothing of the thorns – and then / Say nothing of the snow. / God's will? . . . " (26-28). In fact, she scripts the lines that would speak a recognizable truth to her:

> All you can say is – this:
> 'It is the last time you can kiss

This only one of all the dead,
Knowing it is the last;
These are the last tears you can ever shed
On this fair fallen head.' (35-40)

Repeated references to the body of the dead child keep the poem grounded in the singular reality of loss – "this" [body], "this" [dead], "these" [tears], "this" [head] – rather than the fiction of representative motherhood (or a promised resurrection). Instead of re-casting her loss as heaven's gain for polite society's consumption, she insists on a literal rendering of the child's body and her own loss. Against the standardization and abstraction of the sentimental child elegy, which "hollow[s] out the figure of the dead child, emptying it of any individual identity so that it might serve as a conduit of grief," the speaker insists on a painfully personal rendering of it (Roberts, "Little" 147). Piatt's mother-speaker refuses to be "made whole again" through re-integration into the surrounding sentimental community – the function of sentimental mourning rituals and writings – because she refuses to grant that the child was first and finally God's (or sentimental culture's), rather than her own. Moreover, she rejects the requirement for her own uncritical repetition of sentimental forms and figures.

Rather than Sigourney's sentimental child elegies, it is Hans Christian Andersen's "The Story of a Mother" (1847), with its mix of fantasy, symbolism, and stark realism, which provides a contemporary model for Piatt's child death poems. Much like Piatt's own poems, in fact, Andersen's tales offer scathing cultural criticism, innocently packaged. The mother of Andersen's tale begins the story determined that "I shall save" my sick child, and confident that "*Our Lord* will not take him from me!" (37). When she learns that she has been tricked by Death, who stole away with her child, she vows, "I shall find him!" In order to gain information on where Death has taken the child, Night requires her to sing all of the songs she once sang for her child, a thorn-bush insists she warm it (though it pierces her and draws blood), and she must cry

her eyes out to a lake in order to cross it. These three sacrifices simply repeat the conventional performances of mother – though this time they ring painfully hollow because the child is not there to hear the songs, feel the warm embrace, or receive her tears. The violence done to the mother's body in this scene recalls Butler's articulation of how the woman's body in gender performance is "induce[d] . . . to become a cultural sign" ("Performative" 522). Mother becomes, in Butler's words, a materiality which bears meaning (521). The acts that constitute woman's gendered identity are both done by her and done to her, highlighting their social nature and function. Here, the mother's determination to effect real change through her material body becomes distorted into a meaningless repetition of sentimental signs.

Arriving finally at "Death's great greenhouse" – a staging area for children currently in death's grasp but not yet dead – the mother is encouraged to listen to the heartbeats of all the plants to see if she can find her child's. She finds it – a little blue crocus – and is told that if she wishes to reclaim him she should threaten Death to pluck up other flowers if he plucks her child's. (If not plucked by Death, apparently, the child will recover.) Again, the sentimental image – dead child as flower – becomes the focus and complicates the mother's attempts to act. She does as instructed, grabbing two flowers, threatening to tear them off, and demanding of Death, "Give me back my child!" Death replies, "Thou say'st that thou art so unhappy, and now thou wilt make another mother equally unhappy!" For the first time, she realizes that the flowers she holds, threatening to take, represent other mothers' children. (In her haste, in fact, she has unknowingly grasped her own child's bloom.) Her desire for restoration of the living child has become complicated by the metaphorical renderings of her own and her child's identities. As a woman within sentimental ideology, she *is* every mother and every child belongs to her. Having lost sight of which child she would sacrifice and which mother would grieve as a result, she

gives up her individual claim. Significantly, she does not ask God's forgiveness for her defiance, but insists he ignore her continued cries: "Oh, hear me not when I pray against Thy will, which is the best! hear me not! hear me not!" (46). God's silence is already assured but, by "asking" for it – scripting his non-response – she can maintain the illusion of sustained and meaningful dialogue between heaven and earth.

Like Andersen's determined mother, the mother-speaker of Piatt's "A Butterfly's Message" (1874) refuses to accept her child's death and believes that God will remedy the wrong. Here again we have a mother who, unable to give up either her faith or her desire for her child, revises the script in such a way that God's refusal of her prayers is both assured and justified. The poem is often read as portraying a defiant mother's victory over death; as Jessica Roberts describes it, "the speaking 'I' defies submission and, because of that defiance, her child lives" (*Genealogies* 94). Considered within the context of storytelling as a performative act, as I read it, the child *does* die; the mother, in her grief, refuses to accept the loss, but she does not prevent it. The mother reads and writes her own experience through the conventions of sentimental literature, misinterpreting what she sees and imagining that her relationship with God follows sentimental rules of social engagement, rather than paternal commandment:

> Come in and see him die? That was not he
> So white and strange, so like the very dead.
> Far back in dew and flowers could I not see
> His pretty glimmering head,
> And torn straw hat, instead?
>
> I moaned and moaned: 'O, give me back my child!'
> An Angel laid a small white garment by,
> And looked at me through tears. I only smiled,
> To see him fly and fly
> Alone through God's fair sky. (6-15)

Rather than the angel of death returning to heaven alone (as the mother and Roberts argue), I read the angel as her already-dead child, though the mother is unwilling to recognize him as such, just as she refused to recognize him as a dead body: "[t]hat was not he" (6-7). He is not now as she knew him, so not subject to that new identity's state (either dead or angelic). In refusing to read his transformation into sentimental angel, she refuses to admit his death. She resolves, "I will be very patient now and sweet," and guide the child toward God (16). She tells God, through his emissary the angel (like Andersen's mediator, Death): "If I forget, send me some silent sign," and suggests he use a butterfly (21). Hoping to "make it real," she acts out the words and movements required; she plays the part she has written, in hopes that God will do the same. Her refusal to accept the child's death, ironically, requires her to cling even more desperately to the sentimental ideology that has failed her.

Proof that the child has, in fact, died and taken an angel's form includes the fact that the mother's "vow," an attempt to strike a deal with God, comes after the angel has gone; her reference to "the still Angel" in line thirty-two suggests she realizes (at some level) that it was her dead child. She recalls

> The passionate words, 'Give me back my child,' the vow
> To the still Angel which last year I made,
> And broke, were bitterly remembered now;
> And I was sore afraid
> There in the haunted shade. (31-35)

Further, the "sign" she reads as "divine reproof" is really just a butterfly, a common visitor in Piatt's poems. As in Andersen's story, the mother insists on maintaining formal relations with God, though the signs themselves fail to "mean" as they should. Tragically, the presence of the butterfly is not a message from God, but a reminder that the boy who loved butterflies is absent. Further, there is no child in the poem after line ten – only the mother's desire for God's sign.

Clinging to the sign itself, she hopes to effect their mutual reification (her faith, her child). The tenderness with which a mother instructs and even "reproves" her child (and which the mother claims she receives through the butterfly's message) cannot in fact be counted on from God, Piatt suggests. Like Andersen's mother, she imagines an ongoing communication with heaven because it relieves her of the tragic truth of heaven's silence and stillness regarding her grief. She pretends her prayer was answered and that God takes the time to remind her of their arrangement because if she cannot keep her child, she will at least keep her faith. The speaker here confuses sentimental culture's "disciplinary intimacy" (the Christian family's model) with God's will, which does not require reciprocal exchange between authority and charge. Repeatedly, Piatt's mother-speakers insist on a kind of continuity and consistency between sentimental culture's conventions and heaven's, and only in the final lines of poems admit that God's will is distinctly "dark," where sentimental conventions and Christian teachings would posit "light." Death is God's will, the ending he has "promised" as resurrection and, so, has performatively assured. (Resurrection is also promised, but conditional both on Rachel's cessation of lamentation and Mary's loss of her son.)

Finally, in "Death Before Death" (1871), written before the loss of any children, Piatt imagines that woman as sentimental reader/writer has learned her part too well, so that the lines between reader and writer, text and performance, blur to the point of collapse. As Roberts explains, the endless repetition of abstract terms "Mother" and "Child" in infant elegy anthologies removes their real-world referents and affixes them instead to the poem in the act of reading, encouraging the mapping of the reader's own child onto the dead child and oneself onto the grieving "I" ("Little" 143). As "Death Before Death" begins, we are unsure if the speaker is detached from her own painful experience of child loss, or if she is imagining herself in a

grieving mother's place: "Are mine the empty eyes / That stare toward the little new grave on the beautiful burial-hill?" Both the poem's reader and its speaker (either a reader or writer of sentimental child elegy) share this confusion, suggesting the problematic implications of sentimental identification. Though it is unclear if the speaker is inhabiting or observing the sorrow, the scene includes the features and gestures that mark the mourning mother in conventional sentimental representations: "empty eyes" (1), "wet kiss" (3), "hidden face" (11), "lonesome hands" (13), "sob" (18). Each of the eight stanzas that follow ends with a repetition of the final four syllables in the interrogative, creating a haunting echo that adds to the sense of unreality:

> Was mine that lovely child?
> Did he drop from my heart and go where the Powers of the dust can destroy?
> Can I see the very way he smiled ---
> 'Let God keep his angels'? Do I want my boy –
> I want my boy?

The danger of sentimental identification, as Piatt describes, is that identity becomes so abstracted and interdependent that neither self nor child is recognizable. Dead and living children, mourning and consoling mothers, are indistinguishable within the ongoing performance of grief, as they threatened to become in Death's greenhouse of Andersen's tale. The representation of child death is indistinguishable from its actuality.

The series of questions ends with the fifth stanza, when the speaker imagines literalizing her sympathy in order to save another mother from grief, whispering in her ear that "to save her darling I gave my own, / I gave my own!" This echoes God's promise to Rachel to reward her labors with salvation, achieved through Mary's sacrifice of "his own" son's death, as well as the eventual submission of the mother in Andersen's tale. The final two stanzas analogize sentimental sympathy to theatrical performance:

If not, why let me go
Where another sorrow is watching a small, cold bed alone,
And whisper how I have loved her so,
That to save her darling I gave my own,
I gave my own?

Ah! if I learned her part,
If such dark Fancies can play in despair like tragedy queens,
Then my only audience was my heart,
And my tears, that *were* tears, were behind the scenes,
Behind the scenes.

While dramatizing the conventional experience of *reading* child elegy, as Roberts reads the poem, I believe that the poem also imagines the possibility of textualizing the experience of *writing* loss as sentimental social performance. Piatt represents not only the danger to the reader in sentimental over-identification, but also to the writer who scripts her own erasure. I would argue that the episode represents, to use Melina Esse's words, "how sentimental expression moves between the two poles of self-conscious performance and reticent absorption" in order to induce sympathetic engagement (8). If both reader and writer are "play[ing] in despair" in order to produce sentimental influence, the speaker wonders, could real loss be negated by refusing to either perform it or witness it as performance? Instead of *affect*, Piatt would have her words (like God's) produce *effect*; instead of memorializing a child, she would have the words save one's life. Ultimately, women's shared bond as wives, mothers, and child mourners is not productive, restorative, or comforting – it is simply a mutually-endured, recurring, tragic aspect of performed womanhood. This is what places Piatt's work, Finch argues, "at the cusp of a modern relationship with loss, in which melancholy is equated with an ongoing process, without a foreseeable terminus" (422). Instead of catharsis, the child elegy engenders only crisis, which suggests sentimental identification is just another gendered exclusion of women from the world of action – they must bear pain, not act to change it.

By questioning the terms of sentimental identification within child elegy, and tracing them back to God's arrangement with Rachel, Piatt challenges the dead child's sentimental role as Angel, as well as her own (Angel of the House, addressed in the 1879 poem "The Descent of the Angel"). Much like her earlier challenge of idealized domestic relations between mothers and children, here she problematizes the assumed "natural" identification between women writers and women readers within sentimental culture. The assumption of a uniform feminine response to child death proves to be a dangerous fiction told to women and, in the poet's case, often circulated through them. Piatt's mourning mothers reject the promised consolation and restoration of sentimental mourning and insist, instead, on staying within what Kete describes as a grief marked by "cynicism, discontinuity, [and] isolation" (32). Each insists on the singularity of her loss, her child, and her voice.

Conclusion: Piatt as Mother-Poet

Paula Bernat Bennett argues that Piatt "wrote what is probably the largest single body of poetry about motherhood and children in the English language" (*Palace-Burner* Preface). Ironically, the success of these performances as Mother-Poet – with many readers missing the subversive subtext – contributed to her critical erasure. Though widely published during her lifetime, she was not included in any major anthology between 1925 and 1993 (Michaels 34). With her poems disguised as children's literature and sentimental child elegy, contemporary readers and critics missed much of the irony and formal innovation that today's readers applaud. Even today, scholars focus almost exclusively on Piatt's gendered subversion of social norms, but underestimate her engagement with more complex aesthetic and linguistic concerns of the later nineteenth century. As we have seen, the "problem" of language was a concern she shared with better-known contemporaries like Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Emily Dickinson.[19]

Like these contemporaries, Piatt's poetry flirts with the modernist fear that it is "impossible either for a writer to produce an original text or for a reader to respond to it in any but a mystified way" (Dryden 192). Nineteenth-century American literary concerns with belatedness, and the entanglement of genealogical and representational metaphors, were doubly pressing for women writers, Piatt shows. While applauding her for being "ahead of her time" in feminist sentiment and modernist form, we must not lose sight of how grounded other aspects of Piatt's work were in the unique circumstances of postbellum American literary culture.

In her mother-child poems, Piatt responds to the works of authorial models like Hans Christian Andersen, Lydia Sigourney, and William Shakespeare. Fairy tales, didactic literature, and fanciful dramas were all required material for the middle-class mother's instruction and entertainment of children in the nineteenth century. Piatt also uses these three writers as touchstones for the cultural work her own writing might do, as well as anxieties about her literary legacy. Her interest in such a varied group of writers highlights her concern with broader ideologies of reading, reflecting how these writers were read and appraised in the later nineteenth century, rather than genre-specific conventions. Contemporaries Andersen and Sigourney represent the most obvious models for Piatt, with Andersen a fellow writer for and about children and Sigourney a genteel mother-poet. However, whereas Piatt was expected to be like Sigourney, the ideal mother-writer, she finds that she is more like Andersen, with his mix of fantasy and social satire. She likely envied the freedom of his role as a male writer of "pure" fantasy about mothers and children. At the same time, Piatt also feared that she, like Andersen, would be relegated to the role of children's author and forever excluded from the pantheon of Poets represented by Shakespeare.

Writers for and about children were reduced to children in the popular imagination, as contemporary reviews of both Andersen and Piatt demonstrate. Bernstein's concept of "surrogating childhood," following Joseph Roach's *surrogation*, argues that any available body can be "thrust into the performance of childhood" (*Racial* 24). The presentation of Andersen in newspaper memorials following his death in 1875 (and reflected in the merging of child mourner and children's author in Piatt's poem "At Hans Andersen's Funeral") illustrates how even adults can embody sentimental childhood. One article in particular, from the *Boston Daily Advertiser* of 24 August 1875, infantilizes Andersen and makes him the emotional equivalent of his child-readers: attired in "flopping trousers" and "gigantic boots," he is described as "petulant and pouting, downright, without a notion of reticence, or indeed of modesty, but equally without a notion of evil or indecency" ("Hans"). Further, he is removed from the world of adults and especially canonical writers: "The child-world has lost a friend, who was to it what Shakespeare is to the grown-up world of men and women . . . [he was] to the last a child in heart and in ignorance of the ways of worldliness." An 1877 review in *Scribner's Monthly* advises Piatt to stick to writing "her poems about children, which are the best things that she writes. They interpret the child-nature, and minister to its fantastic demands. If Mrs. Piatt would but devote herself to this charming species of composition . . . she might easily make herself the laureate of childhood" ("Mrs. Piatt's"). Repeatedly, reviewers suggest she not only write about them, but specifically *for* them: "Mrs. Piatt is at her best when she is writing for and about children" ("Art"). Even Howells, who recognized her as "a woman of genius," praises the fact that her poems reflect the limited concerns of a wife, mother, and woman: "It appears to us that the only quality it is worthwhile for women to contribute to literature is precisely this feminine quality" ("Recent Literature: *Woman's"*). Like Andersen, Piatt had to come to terms with her own

representation in print – the story she would become in the popular imagination. Unlike him, however, she also had to contend with a patriarchal domesticity that equated mothers with the children they bore.

In Piatt's mother-child poetry, literary ambitions are often treated with self-effacing humor; mother-speakers repeatedly refer to Shakespeare's cultural status in order to mockingly undercut their own rhetorical power. To nineteenth-century readers, Shakespeare was as popular for his sonnets as his dramas, making him known as "both the poet of the theatre and the home" (Shaw and Marshall 125). In "If I Had Made the World" (1877), the mother-speaker imagines herself as "writer" of the world, in God's place, and contemplates how her world might be different from the existing one. When she asks one of her children for clarification on a detail from the Bible, she reminds herself (and her readers), "There is no need of asking you, / You know as little as I do" (18-19). The child's knowledge of the world is simply a repetition of what the mother has taught, placing mother and child in the same position, passively receiving information from others who truly know things. After a discussion of various creators and their creations, the lesson the mother hears reflected back to her from the child is this: God makes worlds, Shakespeare makes books, and mothers make children who believe the same silly things they believe. Still, the mother claims she would have made just one poet:

> And yet a poet is, my dear,
> A man who writes a book like this,
> (There never was but one, I hear;)
> – Yes, it is hard to spell S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e. (21-24)

In attempting to define "poet," she offers an example that her child-listeners (as we have come to expect) take literally – his is the only book, he is the only poet. For the listening child, the audience within the poem, the "book like this" denotes the treasured collection of Shakespeare that, like the Bible itself, was mandatory in the American middle-class home. For the poem's

audience, however, we sense Piatt is suggesting her own book – the very one from which we are reading her poem – might also qualify.

Noting that this poem was originally published in a periodical, Matthew Giordano argues that Piatt is here "labeling herself as something *different from* a poet: she is a woman who writes in periodicals, not Shakespeare of the first folio" ("Lesson" 27). I would respond that the mother-speaker's claims to her child-listeners are often made for rhetorical effect, and should not be confused with Piatt's own voice. Though this poem appeared first in 1876 in *The Capital*, a Washington D.C. newspaper, it was included in her 1877 collection, *That New World and Other Poems*, which was the fifth of what would eventually total eighteen titles published.[20] Moreover, it is the children who dismiss the possibility of their mother as poet, not the mother herself. The mother's silent acceptance of their judgment does not mean that she agrees; it only acknowledges their opinion as the conventional one. Women's writings, Cheryl Walker argues, "represent a sort of palimpsest . . . giv[ing] us the version of a self made acceptable to nineteenth-century patriarchal society." She continues, "Society as well as reading plays a central part in the choice of a self to reveal. The deeper and less accessible script points to the part of the self that has been violated, almost rubbed out, but that speaks nevertheless" (31-2). I would argue that Piatt is writing such a part for herself in this and other mother-child poems; she acknowledges contemporary restrictions on her creative identity, but performatively projects a future role for herself – a role authorized by readers, like herself, who *read differently*.

Piatt dramatizes the intersections of text and performance in parent-child relations in order to contextualize the experiences of reading literature, raising children, and writing verse in a highly performative, and increasingly skeptical, age. Piatt's "dramatic" poetic, then, perfectly captures the dialogic nature of American culture in the 1870s. As we have seen, the ideal of

normative domesticity required mothers to both act out and narrativize their faithful investment in Christian sentimentality through maternal pedagogy and performance. Piatt's own writing exposes these domestic practices as performance, helping to illustrate their repetitive and generative qualities as social scripts. The settings for sentimental domestic performance (nursery, parlor, grave), as well as its conventional figures (mother, child, God) and forms (fairy tale, child's play, elegy), provide innocent packaging for Piatt's subversive commentaries on sentimental ideology and its practices. Within postbellum America, Piatt argues, the roles of sentimental mother and child had become an exhausting reiteration of tired lines and trite lessons – "the same sad thing" playing yet again. Self-consciously assumed, however, the role of mother allows Piatt to interrogate domestic practice as scripted ideological performance, as well as imagine new possibilities for the stories women's lives might tell.

CODA

> *"Few persons are able to follow such a performance with the necessary attention, and it is almost as great an exertion to see it understandingly, as to act it . . ."*
>
> *- Fanny Kemble, journal of 10 October 1832, from Philadelphia, on watching her father's performance as Hamlet (*American *39)*

With chapters on Dickinson and Piatt bookending my project, it seems appropriate to return to them to offer a few closing thoughts about representations of performance in American women's poetry. Of the five poets addressed, their work is both the most well-known and the most challenging. By applying a performance lens to works and artists that have already received considerable critical treatment, I intend to make the value and broader applications of my approach even more apparent. Performance readings contribute to considerations of the lyric, in Ryan Cull's words, "not only as a socio-historically embedded form but also as a form that may have application to our understanding of the social" (39). In two final poems on Hamlet's "character" (defined both in sentimental and theatrical terms) this is especially apparent, as Dickinson and Piatt consider the limits of language for both communication and self-understanding. Idealized notions of language and society are linked, Timothy Gould explains: "There is, after all, a humanly comprehensible wish for the rightness and appropriateness of our speech – and for the fact that, ideally, the appropriate act of speech will reach all the way out into the world, to secure its appropriate perlocutionary effects" (31). Using the theatrical frame to discuss modern social identity as scripted performance, Piatt examines the irremediable gap between literal meaning and figurative affect, while Dickinson explores what happens when the "right" script is taken up by the wrong player.

Piatt's late poem "At the Playhouse (With a Child)" (1907) portrays a mother's attempt to explain *Hamlet* to a child watching the play with her. Kenneth Krauss explains that in

> the traditional model, the play – the script and its production – conveys meaning to the audience. In real life, however, the audience experiences what happens on stage and tries to make something out of it. In other words, the play not only occurs on stage but also in auditorium, and meaning is determined not by the performance of the script but also by what the audience does with the performance. (19)

In this poem, the mother offers a lesson in thoughtful viewing and interpretation of both tragic drama and social life – one distinctly different from the sentimental (and literal) interpretive model her child utilizes. These two frames diverge as the poem progresses, threatening to break down communication altogether.

> That is the king's son. He is sad
> Because – the king is dead, you see.
> Why, some do think he is gone mad,
> And some that he pretends to be.
>
> "What does he say?" What does he say?
> You ask it in a world where each
> Poor man you meet, in some poor way,
> Knows – my Lord Hamlet's famous speech.
>
> Your father does not know it, though? –
> He could not say a single word?
> One says that to one's self, you know.
> There are more things – than you have heard.
>
> And must you learn it? Yes, you must, –
> By heart, indeed. Nothing can save
> You from it – but a little dust,
> And rose-leaves for a child's sweet grave.
>
> You'd like a real ghost the best?
> (Be to the mock one reconciled.)
> You're tired? "*He does not know the rest?*"
> Because – the rest is silence, child!

The poem begins with the mother identifying Hamlet as "the king's son" and explaining both the character's identity and emotions in terms of this familial relation: "He is sad / Because – the king is dead, you see" (1-2). Clear now on who he is (identity is determined, quite literally, by parentage), the boy asks, "What does he say?" (5). The mother answers indirectly, saying that everyone – "each / Poor man you meet, in some poor way" – knows Hamlet's speech (6-7). While the child takes this literally, thinking they all have memorized the *words* of the soliloquy "he says," his mother means that all are familiar with the *feeling* that leads Hamlet to ask the question, "To be or not to be?" The child claims that his mother is wrong about everyone "knowing" the speech because his father does not know it. The mother's response that these are things one "says to one's self" opens up the possibility that she does not refer to the memorization of the speech but the individual experience of the condition expressed by it (11). Not all aspects of identity are on display, she tells him: "There are more things – than you have heard" (12). Borrowing from Hamlet's line to Horatio – "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy . . ." – the mother compares Horatio's bookish rationalism with the child's objectivist epistemology. There is more to the world, and those in it, than we can see or hear. When she assures the child that he too must "learn" it – "By heart, indeed" – the "must" is not a directive but an imperative; it is an aspect of the human condition, not the subject of a lesson (13-14). (Then again, are these not the same thing, after all?)

When Hamlet's final lines are spoken – "The rest is silence" – the boy predictably interprets that Hamlet has forgotten his lines and "does not know the rest" (19). For the speaking mother, however, the child's interpretation is again oddly accurate (though not in the way he thinks): the tragic hero, by definition, cannot finish his own story (either by narrating or

surviving it). He "becomes," in a sense, what others require of him. Hamlet's predicament is essentially the problem of modern identity, and distinctly a problem of one's relation to language: how can we resist others' attempts to define us without failing to be completely incomprehensible or ineffectual, or ceasing to exist altogether? In the poem, the son's experience of language is strictly literal, while the mother negotiates both literal and figurative meanings (as does Hamlet), and exposes the social implications of the sentimental ideal of transparency between word and world.[1] The boy's unintended insights (not literally true, but figuratively meaningful) suggest that readings, rather than the world itself, determine reality(ies).

Beyond the surface drama of competing interpretations between mother and child, Piatt is also interested in what literal language itself "does" to Hamlet as subject/object. The poem, like the play it describes, continually draws attention to its doubled reference to fiction and reality, theater and life, and the blurred line between them. The play foregrounds the simultaneous states of watching and being watched that constitute theater and society, alike. It begins at the watchtower, where vision is clouded by darkness and fog, with both sentinels demanding that the other (and eventually, the ghost) reveal himself: "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself" (I.i.2). It ends with Horatio ordering that the dead bodies, including Hamlet's, "High on a stage be placed to the view" (literal meaning of stage here as platform, but theatrical stage suggested) and himself vowing to tell the story of how it came to be thus: "All this can I / Truly deliver" (V.ii.365, 372-3). For his part, Fortinbras promises to watch: "Let us haste to hear it, / And call the noblest to the audience" (363-4). He then orders that Hamlet be borne "like a soldier to the stage, / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royally" (383-5). All of the words call to mind the theatrical, even as they indicate the actual.

Hamlet's designation as the king's son determines everyone else's expectations of him (both within the play, and in the playhouse), and eventually overtakes his own idea of who he might be. The retributive action that Hamlet's father's ghost demands of him defines the parameters of the drama and the main character's difficulties throughout. Hamlet is both audience to and obligated player in his father's ghost-play. Whether the ghost himself is real or imagined, the obligation Hamlet feels relative to him is what drives the drama, and its hero, toward its tragic conclusion. Hamlet's delay in choosing, or refusal to act, is then the most independent choice he could possibly make, Piatt suggests. He refuses, for a time, to be hailed or determined by his father's call as representative heir or to fulfill his "own" narrative destiny as tragic hero. In a discussion of negative performatives, Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remark on the "lack of a formulaic negative response" to either being hailed as actor or interpellated as witness: "Thus Dante speaks of refusal – even refusal through cowardice – as something 'great"' (9). It is "easier" (both linguistically and physically) to submit than to resist. In a way, as witnesses (whether through reading or live audience) to the drama's "tragedy," we expect and demand Hamlet's answering of the call; not through agency, but by the "dynamic of compulsory witness" that posits us as audience to the play (10), we will Hamlet to this very end. It is all spelled out for us (and for him) in the title, "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." Hamlet, for nineteenth-century audiences, presented a figure whose extreme self-consciousness, an appeal to mind rather than senses, gave audiences "an appreciation of how thought might preclude action" (Shaw and Marshall 114). One's refusal to be interpellated or called – a refusal to accede to another's script for you – is both heroic and tragic at once, according that to Piatt. The play, in Piatt's reading, represents the conflict between Hamlet's conventional, or literal,

responsibility to father, country, and text – as son, Prince, and hero – and the (dream of) autonomous development of an independent self.

Dickinson's "Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day" (Fr776), from 1863, offers a related argument concerning Hamlet as a model for the complexities of modern identity. Rather than an aesthetic judgment on the relative superiority of lived tragedy over staged tragedy, as it is often read, the poem exhibits the connectedness of society, as stage, and self, as player.[2] Paradoxically, each requires the other for meaning, but this conditionality seems to sever any independent agency because, as sign, it operates in the realm of fiction rather than material reality. The poem in full reads:

> Drama's Vitallest Expression in the Common Day
> That arise and set about Us –
> Other Tragedy
>
> Perish in the Recitation –
> This – the best enact
> When the Audience is scattered
> And the Boxes shut –
>
> "Hamlet" to Himself were Hamlet –
> Had not Shakespeare wrote –
> Though the "Romeo" left no Record
> Of his Juliet,
>
> It were infinite enacted
> In the Human Heart –
> Only Theatre recorded
> Owner cannot shut –

The speaker initially foregrounds life as the present and active stage ("this" which is "infinite enacted") and downgrades theater as secondary, derivative, and removed from reality ("that" which "Perish in the recitation"). The "Us" in line two is powerfully misleading, inviting the reader's identification with both the speaking persona and (eventually) the object-who-imagines-himself-subject. Quotation marks around the characters' names are intended to distinguish them

as staged fictions (as we know them) from the individuals they might imagine themselves to be. The third stanza begins by confidently asserting Hamlet-the-man's self-possession, regardless of the playwright's use or deployment of him as a character. Imitating a "real" actor's assumption of a "fictional" role, the character assumes the status of the real. The poem effects a blurring of reliable divisions between not only actor and character, but also reader/addressee and poetic speaker, calling all identities and relations into question.

The "Though" of line ten signals the reader that all is not as it initially appeared, when the speaker claimed a distinction between world and stage. The initial sovereignty of "'Hamlet' to Himself" proves flimsy or false, as the second set of characters require modifiers: "*the* 'Romeo'" and "*his* Juliet." Juliet does not even merit quotation marks, since Romeo claims her as his own, thereby denying her the self-possession Hamlet seems (at first) to enjoy. The staged characters are attempting to speak for themselves – trying to assert an identity outside of the performance frame. The reader can imagine them appearing on stage after hours, announcing themselves: "I'm really ME now." They are not precisely "Us" as we are not the referent of the pronoun, but their condition applies equally to us as social beings. The rising and setting in the first stanza is not our sun, but their curtain. The doors that shut (or fail to shut) in the final couplet are not the bounds of the "Human Heart" that contain and secure the private self, but actual theater doors that constitute the performance's boundaries. The burdens of (sentimental) human subjectivity are visited upon the character in the final stanza, as he not only claims a "Human Heart" but pronounces it the only reality.

Diana Taylor's concept of "scenario" helps to explain frictions within performance between the role and its embodiment through the actor, frictions making visible (to viewers) areas of resistance and tension between the "original" and "copy" or scene and enactment (30).

Citational practices characterize both live and scripted action, so the conventions for the actor at the end of a play (the curtain call and departure of audience, which signal the actor to leave off a role and resume actual personhood) become confused by the role-turned-actor. He may imagine he has "learned" how to be a person by repeatedly *watching* the transition from stage to offstage, but he cannot himself *perform* it (except, of course, through Dickinson's poem). In trying to "act like" the actor, the character forgets that he does not exist beyond the stage and thus cannot embody actual personhood. Because fictionality *is* his identity, he cannot choose to discard it for reality. But what, Dickinson asks, if he could? What would it mean for "Us," who believe ourselves real? As Taylor explains, in complex readings (and writings) of performance, "the constructed is recognized as coterminous with the real" (4). The character's complications in assuming subjectivity are not altogether different from Dickinson's as poet. Margaret Homans writes that Dickinson's "self-doubling" in such poems results in "an irony of the self": "Just as a word may be asked to bear antithetical meanings, thereby denying the reader's expectation of a stable or consistent reading, the self may split into antithetical parts" (*Women* 209). It is precisely the theatrical frame, I would argue, that allows the poet to explore and expose this aspect of subjectivity.

Imaginatively dramatizing the world as stage – and de-constructing that performance at the same time – Dickinson theatricalizes identity and its ties to public life and language. The shifting of frames that determines truth and fiction in any given context, and is made explicit in the performance event, is what fascinates Dickinson here. Brilliantly, the poem undoes its own initial suggestion; it objectifies language and identity as performance even as it claims to believe and assert the opposite. E. Warwick Slinn argues that poetry exceeds prose fiction and stage drama in effecting social critique because it draws attention to linguistic and citational practices:

"The action by which speakers in poems constitute themselves and their world sets boundaries and reiterates norms, but the means by which poetic language at the same time foregrounds that action has the potential to disrupt those norms, to expose or at least mark their boundary-setting potential" (*Victorian* 26). The terms – both conditional and linguistic – by which we know ourselves (even become selves, in any social sense) are not our own.

Returning to the considerations of performance, performative, and performativity outlined in the Introduction, and central to readings offered throughout "Poetic Acts," this study of women's poetry comes full circle. While Piatt experienced *Hamlet* as a full stage production, Dickinson more likely heard it read in a dramatic recitation, possibly read it aloud as part of the Shakespeare Club, or simply read it by herself from a printed text.[3] Each woman's experience of the dramatic *performance*, either staged or read, helped to shape her representation of it in poetry. Piatt treats the mother-child interaction relative to the staged performance as an analog for her own self-conscious approach to social life and language use. Dickinson superimposes theatrical and social frames in order to experiment with models for subjectivity. While the material facts of reception vary – the architectural enclosure of Piatt's public theater or the theatrics of Dickinson's imagination – they do not significantly alter the *performative* effect of Shakespeare's words as verbal statement. Both Piatt and Dickinson interpret the play as problematizing the individual's relation to world and self through the mediating lens of language. Furthermore, the prevalence of women appearing in the role of Hamlet on stage throughout the century likely impacted women's feelings of affinity with the character and his plight. Because Hamlet was considered a "passionate" and "feminine" male character, it was believed that actresses could best convey the role's emotion (Russell 140). This merging of theater practice and assumptions about gender expression must have influenced Piatt's and Dickinson's own

explorations of performed identity relative to the play.[4] The inherent *performativity* of subjectivity, whether conceived as a product of language as system or of discourse as force, is a concern for all *three* poets, as well as the characters and speakers to whom they give voice. The staged performance event – as well as the woman poet's rendering of it – makes explicit both the desire for stable divisions between public and private, context and text, fiction and reality, other and self, and the impossibility of it.

NOTES

Notes to Introduction

1. Susan Adams, writing from the perspective of feminist rhetoric, argues that Menken's ambiguous display of gender in the photo (short haircut, men's shirt and jacket in a domestic setting) represents a "visual allusion to Byron" and "a rhetorical performance of seductive androgyny" (122, 120).

2. My use of *script* follows Robin Bernstein's in *Racial Innocence*: "The term *script* denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation" (11-12).

3. Sharon Harris argues that the recovery of lost works and writers is not an end, but a beginning: "reaching across the gulf is not simply building bridges to an understanding of the past; it is equally generating new and different ways of theorizing what we discover in the process" (284). Mary Loeffelholz also contends that work beyond anthologizing is needed in order for scholarly significance to be conferred on women's poetry (2).

4. Speech act theory was explicitly addressed in poetry studies from the 1970s, including Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (1978), Mary Louise Pratt's *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977), and Samuel R. Levin's "Concerning what Kind of Speech Act a Poem is" (1976). Opposition to Structuralism in the subsequent decade suggested the theoretical and political limitations of a linguistic focus, narrowly conceived.

5. Without addressing poetry in detail, studies of children's culture, including Monika Elbert's *Enterprising Youth* and Bernstein's *Racial Innocence*, discussed further below, also offer fruitful discussions of literature's influence as an acculturating force.

6. In a number of cases, gaps in American scholarship on poetry and performance are answered by British literature scholars. On the subjects of Spiritualism and literary language (Wilson; Oberhausen and Peeters; Stewart; Owen) and female performers and theater theory (Burroughs; Marshall), in particular, British studies offer the dual focus on language and culture that is often lacking in American poetry studies. Studies of Romantic and Victorian poetry are particularly strong in performative approaches; in addition to Slinn, see Angela Esterhammer's *The Romantic Performative* (2000), Elizabeth Fay's *Becoming Wordsworthian* (1995), and Eric Griffiths' *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (1989). Barbara Garlick's performance-friendly collection, *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry* (2002) even treats English and American poets together.

7. I draw on a wide range of secondary works in this overview. Works by Bruce McConachie, Rosemarie Bank, and Richard Butsch describe the development of theater culture in America over the nineteenth century. James Perrin Warren, Terry Baxter, and Kenneth Cmiel write on American oratory in the century. Faye Dudden, Lesley Ferris,

and Kim Marra address the special circumstances facing women in American theater in the period, while Caroline Levander, Carol Mattingly, and Lindal Buchanan detail the world of women orators. Works by Mary Ryan, Mary Kelley, and Mary Loeffelholz describe women's opportunities for education and public engagement. Women's involvement in religious culture is addressed by Anne Braude, Barbara Leslie Epstein, and Ann Douglas.

8. Changes in American literary and theater cultures were concurrent and, with the rise of the periodical, often directly connected (Dudden 59). This may help to explain the prevalence of performance as subject matter and setting in period literature. The 1850s saw the emergence of literary/art periodicals, including *Harper's Monthly* in 1850, *Putnam's Monthly* in 1853, and the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1857 (Sofer 4). Writers who were also professional drama critics included Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, William Dean Howells, and Henry James (Ackerman 40). Periodical culture fostered an ongoing exchange among writers who were also critics of popular performance.

9. Daphne Brooks and Saidiya Hartman, among others, have written on the theatrics of slavery (the staging of black bodies for auction) and abolitionism (ex. Henry Box Brown's re-enactments of his escape) in the mid-nineteenth century, and their influence on black activism and entertainment. Gustavus Stadler compares P.T. Barnum's "mass spectacles of fascination" to abolitionist stagings: "Barnum and abolitionism made public *scenes*, seeking to rivet large audiences by staging relations it expected them to find *ob*scene. Their potency derived from a willingness to represent capitalism exceeding its proper bounds" (70).

10. Mary Kelley argues for the relative equality of men's and women's educational opportunities, but does not address the distinct goals for or modes of preparing them for public engagement. One example of her idealized view: ". . . women schooled at female academies and seminaries had fewer choices. And yet they did have one advantage that proved crucial to the influence they wielded in civil society. More than either law or medicine, teaching, writing, and editing, professions that were open to women, intersected with the making of public opinion" (83).

11. Southern women, Kenneth Cmiel notes, did not begin to speak in public until the Civil War (71). Caroline Levander explains that regional distinctions of voice and oratory were noted as early as Jefferson in 1785 and that the Southern oral tradition "shaped southern women's pro-slavery and abolitionist writings" (77, 76).

12. Barbara Epstein argues that female and male conversion experiences were markedly different in the nineteenth century; while female conversions centered on internal conflicts interpreted by women and their ministers as issues of original sin, men's conversions were more often the direct result of social pressure from women (47).

13. Contemplating the predicament of nineteenth-century women poets, Margaret Homans imagines their internalization of cultural myths about language: "It must have made a considerable difference to one's sense of self to have been a girl instead of a boy growing

up in a context in which Biblical history was the dominant metaphorical framework in which human activity was viewed . . . to read Genesis (and Milton) and see oneself in Eve rather than in Adam would lead to an entirely different sense of self in relation to language" (*Women* 170). Isolated from the literal language of Adam and God, Eve (and the women poets who follow her) finds that "the mask that figuration provides" can be productive, rather than limiting (223).

Notes to Chapter One

1. Letter from Dickinson to Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland, November 1858 (L195). Dickinson describes her garden's death in autumn as a "lesson" in dying, and connects nature's instructive performance to her own epistolary storytelling.

2. Amherst's unique combination of "cultural appetite with artistic privation," Jane Donahue Eberwein argues, "forced this community toward language for expression and enjoyment" (*Strategies* 38). The performative potential of even written language, Dickinson jokes in the letter to the Hollands above, is "'Quite as good as a play,' indeed!" (L195).

3. Dickinson's letters to Abiah Root regarding oral examinations at Amherst and Holyoke show the anxiety expected from any student, but they do not reveal any serious concern about her willingness to participate or do well in these public displays (L7, L18, L36). Lavinia Dickinson told a story about her sister's skillful performance in first-semester examinations in mathematics at Holyoke. Unprepared to recite on Euclid, Dickinson instead approached the chalkboard and drew a diagram, all the while talking, such that "the dazed teacher" awarded her top honors (qtd. in Eberwein, *Strategies* 159).

4. Dickinson equates heaven and schoolroom as venues for didactic performance in a number of poems, including "If the foolish, call them '*flowers*' - " (Fr179), "I shall know why - when Time is over - " (Fr215), "Although I put away his life - " (Fr405), and "Not in this World to see his face - " (Fr435). The Puritan ideal of education in Amherst, Jones argues, focused on the vital importance of reading (the Bible) to the individual's spiritual salvation: "Dickinson was taught to regard all of life and learning from a religious perspective" (316).

5. Dickinson was a member of the Shakespeare Club, where she famously rejected a male tutor's suggestion of censoring the plays by responding, "There's nothing wicked in Shakespeare, and if there is I don't want to know it"; the Club continued reading full texts of the plays (Finnerty 16).

6. Jack L. Capps records that the Dickinson household subscribed to *The Springfield Republican*, *The Hampshire and Franklin Press*, and *The Amherst Record* (128). Carlton Lowenberg notes the Dickinsons had lifelong subscriptions to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Scribner's Monthly* and *Atlantic Monthly* (21).

7. A letter to the Norcross cousins from 1873 suggests Dickinson heard pianist Anton Rubenstein (L390) but Judy Jo Small says this is impossible, since he did not come to the U.S. until 1872, after her seclusion (228.n20).

8. This is illustrated by Dickinson's intense interest in actor Tomasso Salvini (Finnerty 175, 177) and pianist Anton Rubenstein; though she never saw either perform in person, she followed them closely in the papers and discussed them frequently in letters.

9. The mysterious effects visited upon successful converts only served to isolate Dickinson from friends and family, as detailed in poems like "She's happy - with a new Content - " (Fr587), "Father - I bring thee - not myself - " (Fr295), and "If I'm lost – now - " (Fr316).

10. Dickinson's father, sister, and Sue joined the church during the 1850 revival, and her father recommitted himself during the 1873 revival (Lundin 189).

11. The same image is offered in "A Tooth opon Our Peace" (Fr694), where the purpose of doubt is "[t]o vitalize the Grace" (4).

12. A number of poems begin, as this does, with a seemingly solid faith that unravels over the course of the verse, thus challenging, rather than mirroring, traditional sermonic structure. "I know that He exists" (Fr365) is another, which contradicts its opening affirmation by slowly exposing God's cruel hide-and-seek game.

13. Dickinson's earlier poem, "I fear a Man of frugal speech - " (Fr663) may offer a similar statement on the power of Parker's "simple and grave" preacher. The speaker claims she can master the "Haranguer" and "Babbler" but fears the "Silent Man" who "weigheth - While the Rest - / Expend their furthest pound - ."

14. In a number of poems, Dickinson describes sunset—day's "ending"—in terms of a performance event. Here, nature is not contrasted with the social, but described in its terms and according to its sense of schedule and order. In addition to Fr257, poems "Whole Gulfs - of Red, and Fleets - of Red - " (Fr468), "Like Mighty Foot Lights - burned the Red" (Fr507), "From Cocoon forth a Butterfly" (Fr610), and "Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day" (Fr776) address nature in terms of a theatrical performance. For Dickinson, representing a lived moment like sunset or death as performance helps to contain and order the chaos of existence, what E. Miller Budick terms "the explosion into phenomenal being that defines the world as we know it," into meaningful narrative (6).

15. In a letter to Elizabeth Holland of 1856, Dickinson uses similar imagery to express doubt that the immateriality of heaven could improve on our known world: "I should like to see what He *was* building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either" (L185).

16. For Dickinson, the issue of death also called into question the biblical promises upon which all religious performances were based. The poet read God's promise of salvation,

both scriptural and sacramental, as a performative statement (as J. L. Austin would later term it), much like the utterance of a judge, minister, or even auctioneer, who, by saying, makes it so. Poems including "Do People moulder equally" (Fr390) and "The Auctioneer of Parting" (Fr1646) play with the idea that even God is bound by the social conventions of the speech act. A similar reading of God's promises as speech acts is found in Sarah Piatt's poems on child death, as discussed in Chapter Four.

17. While she does not address this poem (Fr381) in particular, Sharon Cameron argues that Dickinson's negations operate such that "the suppositional is shown to be actual," with the result that the disavowal is actually a claim (*Choosing* 167).

18. In this quote, McIntosh is discussing Dickinson's poem "I dwell in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose" (Fr466). He argues that her explorations of belief depend upon a unique consciousness of time in the expression of thought: "one believes and disbelieves by turns as one faces the unknown . . . Vacillation can even be a structural principle, a means to her own coherence . . ." (31). In the figure of the house, this structural principle takes literal form.

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at MLA 2013's EDIS panel, "Rethinking Dickinson's Lyrics."A version is also forthcoming in Emily Dickinson Journal, Fall 2014.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. In a letter to Harriet St. Leger dated 9 March 1830, Kemble includes this parenthetical list denoting the "excitement of acting" (*Journals* 28). A fuller quotation gives useful context: "[T]he happiness of reading Shakespeare's heavenly imaginations is so far beyond all the excitement of acting them (white satin, gas lights, applause, and all), that I cannot conceive a time when having him in my hand will not compensate for the absence of any amount of public popularity."

2. Biographical information in this paragraph follows Kemble biographies by Ann Blainey and Deirdre David.

3. The tragedies of inheritance that animate so many of Shakespeare's plays also provided a framework for Kemble's poetic persona as sacrificial lamb to British theater and her family's legacy. Heather McPherson observes that the 1830 double portrait of Kemble and her aunt Sarah Siddons by Henry Perronet Briggs does not embody continuity as much as underscore "the tensions and complexities of dynastic transfer from one generation to the next, reminding us of the violence and loss they inevitably entail" (128). Leo Braudy, speaking of the predicament of King George VI as illustrated in the film *The King's Speech*, notes "the paradox of having, even inheriting, a public role that cannot be just assumed but has to be performed" (1072). The same could be said of conventional femininity itself.

4. Menken claimed to have married Cuban poet and revolutionary Juan Clemente Zenea around 1850, but most biographers dismiss this, reporting her first marriage as the one to Alexander Isaac Menken in 1856. Gregory Eiselein also mentions "rumors about other early marriages – one about someone from Louisville, another about a man named 'McA---' from New Orleans" (18).

5. Biographical information in this paragraph follows Menken biographies by Renee Sentilles and Gregory Eiselein.

6. Carol Mattingly explains that critics of the mid-century's new woman who wished to provoke public fear about her "nearly always did so through dress metaphors" (15). Elizabeth Mullenix notes that Kemble also faced harsh (early) criticism in the press for wearing pants in public ("So" 27).

7. Fellow poet Lord Byron presents an interesting model for Kemble's anxieties (actual or assumed) regarding theatrical performance. Kemble loved Byron's verse as a student in Paris (1821-25) but later felt she had to "give him up" for her own good (David 35-36). While Byron claimed he never intended to write for the stage, instead producing only "closet drama," twentieth-century scholarship shows this was a defensive posturing to protect his intense "desire and terror of dramatic fame" (Erdman 221). Byron claimed he wrote unactable plays for a "mental theatre" so as not to denigrate his poetry by presenting it on the stage, which is strikingly similar to Kemble's valuation of the artist's *conception* over the actor's *expression* in *On the Stage*. In his Preface to *Marino Faliero*, Byron sounds eerily close to Kemble as he reveals both his sensitivity to applause and sharp criticism of theater audiences: "I cannot conceive any man of irritable feeling putting himself at the mercies of an audience. The sneering reader, and the loud critic, and the tart review, are scattered and distant calamities; but the trampling of an intelligent or of an ignorant audience . . . is a palpable and immediate grievance" (Erdman 232.n67). Byron's journal of 1814 and Kemble's letter to Harriet St. Leger dated 21 December 1831 even offer similar evaluations of John Kemble and Edmund Kean's acting styles (qtd. in Manning 189; *Journals* 33). Similarities in Byron and Kemble's self-conscious denials of theater, and ties to their own ambitions as writers, invite additional scholarly attention.

8. Richard Brodhead notes that novelists Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern enhanced their celebrity through book tours, which treated writers as entertainers (53).

9. Kemble's essay "Goethe and Werther," which provides a narrative frame for her poems on genius, discusses the discord between Goethe and his friends the Kestners, the originals for *The Sorrows of Young Werther*'s Albert and Charlotte, regarding his "use" of their likenesses (and even their words, at times transcribed directly from personal letters) in his novel. Kemble read the (unpublished) letters detailing the effects of the novel's fame on the friendship and was fascinated equally by Goethe's belief that he had immortalized his friends and their conviction that he had pilloried them. Kemble reflects, "The unutterable difference between genius and its less gifted fellows, made itself felt most keenly to both parties; and the bleeding and suffering of the tender human

sympathies that bound them, is one of the saddest illustrations of the kind that I ever met with" (*Year* 140). Like the poems, it is difficult to determine which side Kemble ultimately takes in the dispute.

10. Sentilles notes that the horse appearing onstage in *Mazeppa*, a black mare playing a wild stallion, was crossdressing, too ("Identity" 130).

11. A less complimentary reading of Kemble's body was offered by Herman Melville who, in a letter to a friend in 1849, describes Kemble as "unfemininely masculine" and goes on to joke, "had she not, on impeccable authority, borne children, I should be curious to learn the result of a surgical examination of her person in private" (qtd in Mullenix "So" 27).

12. Kemble expressed sympathy for other unwilling exhibitors on the public stage. In June 1833, in New York, Kemble attended a "viewing" of Black Hawk and his retinue. She records in her journal, "I cannot express the feeling of commiseration and disgust which the whole scene gave me. That men such as ourselves, creatures with like feelings, like perceptions should be brought, as strange animals at a show, to be gazed at the livelong day by succeeding shoals of gaping folk, struck me as totally unfitting . . . How they must loathe the sight of these narrow walls, and the sound of these strange voices; how they must sicken for their unmeasured range of wilderness!" (*American* 96-7). She empathizes with Black Hawk's position as object, and a connection to her own position as public performer cannot be ignored. The same "folk" attending, the same disconcerting "sound of these strange voices," and the desire to return home to a place a youthful innocence – these are her reflections on her own experiences and the same images she uses in poems on the burdens of fame.

13. Partly as a result of her own desires to imagine her friend as happy, and partly as a result of Kemble's claims to that effect, Jameson was largely unaware of the very real crisis in Fanny's marriage to Butler. Kemble confided in Jameson only her intellectual frustrations, Deirdre David argues, but never her domestic ones (67). For Jameson, David writes, "Kemble assumed the mask of settled wife, assuring her that she was well and happy" (127). Still, in a letter of October 1834, (likely alluding to artistic woes rather than romantic ones) Kemble tells Jameson of the irremediable gap "between what she wished she were and, by implication, what she actually was," which bears a striking resemblance to the muted tragedy in this poem (David 136).

14. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Sonnet on Mrs. Kemble's Reading from Shakespeare," from 1850, also imagines Shakespeare as an auditor to Kemble's performance, and reflects the traditional notion of the female performer as mere vessel for masculine art.

15. Menken repeatedly represents both failure and success through the image of voice. In addition to poems discussed in the main text, the poetic figure suffers due to lack or loss of voice in "A Fragment," "The Autograph on the Soul," and "Answer Me," and triumphs through voice in "Adelina Patti," "A L'Outrance," and "Battle of the Stars."

Notes to Chapter Three

1. From Sprague's "The Angel's Visit" (300), a poem describing her illness, recovery, and entrance onto the public stage, written soon after her cure but before she began lecturing full-time (M.E.G. xvi).

2. As a public poet, Sprague followed in her father's footsteps. Charles Sprague's poetry exhibits a similar faith in spirits, as evidenced in "The Family Meeting," published in the *Vermont Chronicle* of 22 October 1845, which reassures grieving family members that those who have passed are still present: "We're all – *all* here!" After his death, Charles even "wrote" a poem to his daughter titled "To Bell" (Achsa's pen name), channeled through medium C. Johnson, which acknowledges and encourages her work as a public lecturer. For her own part, Achsa also spoke beyond death, encouraging fellow trance speaker and friend Melvina Townsend, through medium Lizzie Doten, "To give you power" (Braude 116). A book titled *Achsa W. Sprague and Mary Clark's Experience in the First Ten Spheres of Spirit Life* by Athaldine Smith (with the deceased Sprague and Clark also listed as authors, indicating their contributions via spirit) was published in 1881.

3. Sprague's use of "Bell" as a pen name suggests her identification with Charlotte Bronte, whose *Jane Eyre* was first published in 1847 under the name Currer Bell. Emily and Anne Bronte also used the surname Bell for published writings. From her diary, we know that Sprague read *Jane Eyre* in the summer of 1849 and found it "a very interesting work and just fascinating enough to suit me at this time" (132). Sprague also uses the name "Mr. Bell" in *The Poet*; though we never hear from him directly, Bell is described as "the great reformer and fanatic" by Clifton (not reform-minded), who also considers the Improvisatrice to be Bell's "prodigy" (74).

4. Leonard Twynham, who compiled and edited selections from Sprague's diary and journal for the Vermont Historical Society in 1941, at that time claimed to have a large number of Sprague's unpublished works in his possession. Twynham wrote that Sprague's published works "include only a fraction of her writings. I have a vast quantity of manuscript material, verses and essays, which await publication" (274). Among the materials Twynham promised: "an autobiographical poem of 162 pages, which she composed in six days . . . and also a poetic play of 75 pages dealing with the Biblical story from Eden to Calvary" (274). A similar promise was made in the "Advertisement" for The Poet *and Other Poems*: "The contents of this volume include but a portion of the Poems placed in the hands of the compiler for publication. There remains material more than sufficient for another volume of the size of the present" (v). M.E.G. (still unidentified), who wrote the "Introductory Remarks" for the volume, offered one detail regarding the additional material: "'The Child of Destiny,' a dramatic poem of about 3,000 lines, was completed in five and a half days from its commencement" (xx). This is likely the "autobiographical poem" mentioned by Twynham in his inventory. "The Papers of Achsa W. Sprague (1827-1861)," now held by VHS, were donated by Twynham's brother Francis in 1976, after he found them in Leonard's house following

his death in 1968. Unfortunately, they comprise only one box of materials, mainly letters written to Sprague during her lecture career. The original diary, journal, and other unpublished writings of Sprague have not been found.

5. References to Sprague's long poems *The Poet*; *I Still Live: A Poem for the Times*; and "The Angel's Visit" (from The Poet *and Other Poems)* and diary and journal entries (from "Selections") cite page numbers, while all others give individual line numbers.

6. One fascinating example of performance art within the movement involved a group of radical free-love Spiritualists named (by spirit guides) the Sacred Order of Unionists, who organized a "machine shop" where entranced members performed elaborate moving tableaux using their bodies to simulate mechanical processes (such as a working sewing machine) in order to stimulate new and innovative ideas. "The participants' purpose was to receive mental impressions of patentable ideas for the machine [and toward this end the] researchers culminated their investigations in sexual activity in order to increase their sensitivity to impressions from the spirit world" (Buescher 202). The idea had come from Elias Howe, an inventor who solved the problem of the sewing machine after dreaming about being chased by a spear with a hole in it, providing the idea for a needle with a hole for the thread. By "modelizing" (as the spirits termed it) inventions, the members hoped to bring the process of invention and creation under control in order to enact new processes and solutions in the here-and-now. As Buescher explains it, their spirit-directed dramatic tableaux resulted in something like "performance art, a theater of the imagination that they hoped would somehow be realized in the material world" (203). The Sacred Order of Unionists was organized by John M. Spear, a friend of Sprague's. Her journal of April 5, 1856, speaks highly of him and records how she joined him in speaking at his daughter's funeral (170).

7. In 1888, Margaret Fox (one of the original "rapping" sisters of Rochester) confessed that the rappings had been a hoax and even demonstrated the methods used to deceive audiences. One year later, she recanted her confession but the damage had already been done to the sisters' reputations (if not to Spiritualism itself). As Alan Aldridge concludes, "This pattern of confession followed by retraction, which is not uncommon, has supplied both spiritualists and skeptics with material to support their case, so controversy never ends" (58).

8. Sprague criticizes Byron and Wordsworth, in particular, for being "dreamers" rather than doers, actors, or workers. In *The Poet*, she refers to Byron by name (60, 61), but only alludes to Wordsworth with what seems to be a reference to the famous line from his "Intimations Ode," which reads, "Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" (177-8). Sprague aims to contradict what the poem (or its prevalent interpretation) suggests about the poet's role in the world:

> The poet has been called a dreamer vain,
> Who idly sings his still more idle strain,
> To please the ear and fancy's careless eye,
> To catch imagination passing by;

> A thing of beauty, like the summer flower, -
> To live, to bloom, to perish in an hour.
> But 'tis not so . . . (31)

Sprague goes on to specify how the true poet of the soul differs from the isolated, self-absorbed, unenlightened Romantic poet.

9. The passivity of the female medium parallels the tradition of the passion of saints and martyrs in Christianity. Martyrs, whom early Christian venerated as intercessors, were believed to be specially inspired by the Holy Spirit. Throughout her journals, Sprague chastises herself for lapses in strength, believing her own suffering to be productive of public good. Importantly, where Christians aligned themselves with the passion of Christ, in the period leading up to his crucifixion, Sprague more closely identifies with the human suffering of those who do not (yet) share her faith.

10. Deborah Manson and Susan Grant have written on the belief expounded most famously by Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Barrett Browning that women's mesmeric agency is linked to, or heightened by, physical disability.

11. Victoria Stewart's article on Spiritualism in contemporary British literature addresses a number of works by Hilary Mantel, including her 2006 radio play "The Price of Light," about Anton Mesmer's treatment of the blind pianist Maria van Paradis. The quote, from Mantel's play, comes from Mesmer's wife, who is encouraging him to ignore his detractors in the medical establishment.

12. Sprague recorded, "I thought it might be pleasing to go as I had never been to an occasion of the kind" (157). Whether she is referring to the Christmas Eve service or an Episcopalian church, more generally, is unclear. Neither Twynham nor M.E.G., who provide the most detailed biographical information on Sprague, mention the family's regular church attendance or membership, though it would be highly unlikely for the period if Achsa was, in fact, raised outside the church. Twynham notes that the sermon delivered at Sprague's burial was given by a female medium, a Mrs. Newton of Bridgewater, rather than a minister or priest ("Achsa" 275).

13. Similarities between Sprague's and Dickinson's insights into ties between religion and the woman artist offer fertile ground for future study. Where Dickinson's poetics expressed this most often through the speaker's ambivalence, in Sprague it takes on a more public aspect as lived paradox. In sharp contrast to Dickinson, however, Sprague's work balances her sensitivity to the limitations of language with an equally formidable optimism regarding performance's potential for bridging the gap between word and deed, spirit and matter.

14. One interesting point of connection between Sprague and Walt Whitman, a poet who shared her ideal of poetic participation in the nation, is that Whitman, between the first and second editions of *Leaves of Grass*, became interested in trance mediumship and tried for a full year (unsuccessfully) to train himself as a medium. Cora Hatch explained

to him that it was not dependent on his suitability or seriousness but on the existence of a corollary medium-spirit on the other side (McGarry 170).

15. Melville's "America" begins and ends with a prophetic female figure watching the American landscape and, as Sweet notes, the gendering of the figure as female contributes to its "natural" ability to represent collective identity.

16. Douglass himself had direct experience with early Spiritualist practice, when he (unintentionally) attended a séance at the home of friends Amy and Isaac Post, who were among the first to convert to the faith. Based on a letter to Amy Post (5 April 1850) written soon after, Douglass was unimpressed by the display, and unconvinced of spirit influence, but concerned that he had offended his hosts by his vocal response.

17. The Charter Oak was blown down in a violent storm the next year, 1856, but its wood was used to make a desk for the Governor as well as chairs for the state's Speaker of the House and President of the Senate. I imagine Sprague would approve of such practical and symbolic use of the tree, making it a constant memory for present-day lawmakers, who literally sit or write on that history each day as they undertake their own duties.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. From "At the Play" (line 20), a poem first published in *The Independent*, 1873.

2. In the introduction to *Palace-Burner*, Bennett comments briefly on the "corrupting effect" of children's imitation of middle-class adult roles in play (xlvi). A 2013 article by Zachary Finch notes Piatt's frequent use of the trope of theater and "related activities of ventriloquism and dressing up" in poems about mothers and children (441).

3. Poems from the period are found in the following collections: *A Woman's Poems* (1871), *A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles, etc.* (1874), *Poems: In Company with Children* (1877), *That New World and Other Poems* (1877), and *Dramatic Persons and Moods* (1880).

4. Catherine Robson notes that "enforced juvenile performance" was a popular subject in nineteenth-century comic writing, with humorous episodes of classroom poetry recitation appearing in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and Stephen Crane's short story "Making an Orator" (156). The irony of poetry's particular use as performance material in both domestic and schoolroom instructional settings was surely not lost on Piatt. Robson, Angela Sorby, and Joan Rubin have written on this trend in nineteenth-century education.

5. Women, by nature, were suspect as readers: "In Genesis, the first woman, Eve, is already a reader of a text. She 'reads' the tree of knowledge against the command of the creator by eating an apple from this tree" (Aliagi-Buchenau 45).

6. This formulation draws upon Paul Ricoeur's concepts of a *hermeneutics of suspicion* and a *hermeneutics of faith*, originally discussed in relation to interpretative stances in psychoanalysis (148). While a faithful reading assumes meanings are relatively transparent and attempts "to believe in the manner of the believer," a suspicious reading is characterized by "a skepticism towards the given" and an attempt to decode hidden meanings (Josselson 9, 3). In my reading, Piatt and her mother-speakers represent the suspicious/skeptical stance, while the children are more often faithful listeners.

7. In reference to "Sour Grapes," Paula Bennett notes the poem's allusion to Aesop's fable, "The Fox and the Grapes," and reads the "Fathers" as a reference to the Old South, "which poisoned itself with what it most desired" (*Palace-Burner* 18.n33). I believe that the more significant inference is the Rachel episode of Jeremiah 31, in which God pronounces that Israel's restoration and mankind's salvation is directly tied to her submission as representative mother. Promising the coming of Christ (through another representative mother, Mary), the biblical passage reads: "In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. / But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape his teeth shall be set on edge" (31.29-30). While the fathers are freed of responsibility – as their sins will not be visited upon subsequent generations – mothers are implicated, through Rachel, to be always on guard against loss.

8. Andersen's funeral was described extensively in American papers throughout the latter half of August 1875 and details in the poem (King, wreath, merging of author and child-fan) suggest Piatt's familiarity with them. According to biographers, shortly before his death Andersen consulted a composer about the music for his funeral and told him: "Most of the people who will walk after me will be children, so make the beat keep time with little steps" (Bryant 12). The poem eerily recreates this scene of children attending his coffin.

9. Desire for the romanticization of real-world difficulties was not exclusive to child-readers, of course. Piatt's "The Story of a Shawl" (1879) seems to follow a *New York Times* article dated February 4, 1879, which describes the origin and progress of the plague in Russia ("Plague-Stricken Russia"). The by-line of the article reads like the summary of a stage tragedy:

> The disease introduced by a Cossack in a shawl given to his sweetheart – Abject terror of the inhabitants throughout Russia – The plague rapidly spreading – Every effort being made to check its progress.

   The suggestion that the brutality of war has cursed the love story of the soldier and his sweetheart, and polluted the nation as a whole, has clear associations with Piatt's own feelings about the Civil War and her Southern childhood.

10. Piatt playfully alludes to this popular view of women in a number of poems. In "A Wall Between" (1880) the speaker mockingly refers to her own attempt at confession as "a woman's tale (of wrong and grief) / And, therefore, none too brief" (5-6). In "The

Sorrows of Charlotte" (1872), the mother explains that Goethe's book does not discuss Charlotte's sorrows because "never a man would care / To write such a long sad story" (11-12).

11. Jessica Roberts argues that "My Babes in the Wood" is a poem about infanticide: "Piatt's poem cheerfully stages the murder of two children at the hands of their mother as she narrates to them the story of their death" (*Genealogy* 103). I believe, instead, that the "dead selves" the mother refers to are her listening children's younger child-forms, not their present-day literal selves.

12. W.D. Howells, in a review of Piatt, suggests the same when he praises the limited scope of her work: "It is a wife . . . a mother . . . a woman . . . who sings here" ("Recent Literature: *Mrs*").

13. In "A Child's Party" (1883), the mother-speaker tells her children how she once had a slave child pretend to be her grandmother, costumed in her lace and shawl, in order to play fancy party in the yard with family heirlooms. At her own mother's death, the child imaginatively took on the mother's (vital, though vacant) role, with the black child as place-keeper (the still-living relic of grandmother) contrasting her own youth and beauty. The white child's self-conscious "use" of the black child is powerfully conveyed in her warning: "just remember you are black" (16). When domestics discover the child's game they are shocked, but the mother's black nurse defends the play and offers her cakes to make the "party" complete.

14. Gail Marshall notes that the growth of Shakespeare's cultural significance in the nineteenth-century was tied to the growth of women's literacy; women read Shakespeare to their children and, as part of "a maternally derived aesthetic," the stories were passed down from mother to daughter (13).

15. In "Thorns" (1871), the mother-speaker tells her child that the thorn tree is dear to her because it knows grief like her own: "Through [the thorns] I dimly understand, / And learn to quiet and command / The passionate pain I bear for you" (34-6). Its nature, like her own as woman and mother, is not bearing flowers or fruit, but grief. The mother's association with thorns also suggests the sacrifice of Christ.

16. As readers, Piatt's mother-speakers most closely identify with the grieving mothers of classical epic, perhaps because such texts invite narrative empathy while child elegy requires a more distanced sympathy. Though the term "empathy" was not coined until the twentieth century, the earlier concept of *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") from German aesthetic theory, which describes the projection of self into an object of contemplation and a resulting vicarious sharing of affect, was a concept familiar in Piatt's time (Abrams 51). Nicole Fluhr describes empathy as a "haunting," an invasion which dissolves boundaries between past and present, self and other (287). This is precisely the response Piatt's mothers have to scenes of child death in "A Hint from Homer" (1878) and "The Thought of Astyanax beside Iülus (After Reading Virgil's Story of Andromache in Exile)" (1880).

17. Piatt married in 1861 and gave birth to her first child, the only girl, in 1862. She went on to have six sons, the oldest of whom, named Victor, died at the age of ten in 1874 in a July 4th fireworks accident. Piatt had lost a baby, an unnamed days-old infant, only eleven months earlier in August 1873. She also lost a son named Louis, age nine, in a boating accident in 1884, while the family was living in Ireland.

18. Margaret Homans similarly describes the basis for women's treatment within dominant myths of language in the nineteenth century: "Women's obligation to enact the word of God is thus a compensation for the first woman's conceiving the word of Satan" (*Women* 139). The burden placed upon woman as representative mother is not a reward from God, but punishment.

19. This differs from Bennett's evaluation of Piatt in relation to Dickinson. Bennett argues, "Piatt's kind of poetry – poetry wedded to social commitment, to politics – could not be more antithetical to Dickinson's largely insular and language-oriented art and should not be compared to it" (*Palace-Burner* 1). While Piatt's life certainly differed from Dickinson's, I believe that their poetry shared similar concerns relating to language, convention, and belief.

20. According to Bennett, in fact, after 1861 Piatt "never wrote seriously for newspapers again" (*Palace-Burner* xxviii).

Notes to Coda

1. Women's intuitive insight, and resulting skepticism, are contrasted with men's (including husbands, sons, and ministers) confidence in appearances in a number of Piatt's poems, including "The Sight of Trouble" (1880), "About a Magician" (1877), and "A Wall Between" (1880).

2. Jack Capps writes that Dickinson "considered Shakespeare as material to be admired, quoted, and absorbed, but not presumed upon. Although she could be impudent with the deity, she displayed remarkable reverence for mortal Shakespeare" (65).

3. Páraic Finnerty details Dickinson's involvement in the extracurricular Shakespeare Club, which read aloud from full texts of the plays (16), the theater-loving Norcross cousins reading plays to Dickinson after her eye treatments in 1864 and 1865 (39), and her own declamation in the garret, which served as her "own private home auditorium, in which she could give full expression to words and emotions, making echo and resonance central to the activity of reading" (40). Finnerty speculates that Dickinson may have attended Lizzie Johnson's Shakespeare reading at Amherst in June 1852 (51). In a letter to her Norcross cousins in January 1859, Dickinson writes that she has "heard many notedly bad readers" of Shakespeare, though we do not get any details (L199).

4. Sarah Siddons, Fanny Kemble's aunt, was the first woman known to have played Hamlet, beginning in 1776, and at least fifty English and American actresses played the role in the nineteenth century (Russell 139, 143). Kemble never played a male role, though she did play Juliet to Ellen Tree's Romeo (138).

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